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NIGHTMARE VILLAGE

Written by
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 27
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Written by
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English translation by
KEVIN LEAHY



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Those Called By The Rain

chapter 1

I

From off somewhere in the urgent pattering of the rain there came a far deeper echo like a rumbling in the earth. The room began to quake a bit.

“Oh damn!”

Grabbing the traveling bag resting by his side, Bligh used it to hit the girl and the procurer lying to his right.

“What in the—?!”

“Just what do you think you’re doing?!”

Looking them in their irate but still sleepy eyes, the man told them, “The ground’s rumbling. There’s a massive landslide on its way!”

And with that he jumped down to the dirt floor ahead of them. As if from the force of his landing, the building then shook quite clearly.

Exiting the hotel, Bligh ran off toward a hill to the west he’d noticed before checking in, and behind him was the sound of voices and footfalls. At the very least the other two from his room, plus another girl who’d been staying in the big room, had been saved. No matter what fate the future might hold for them, at the moment his heart was clearly carved with the words *Where there’s life, there’s hope*.

Bligh didn’t invite them to join him. The rest would depend on the luck of

each individual.

Rain lashed him from head to toe. The wind was blowing in exactly from the west.

That figures, he thought to himself. First a landslide, then a downpour right in his face. That was still kid stuff. All he needed now was to be surrounded by an angry mob and some cannibals, and then he'd finally be ready to throw in the towel.

After he'd run for about three minutes, two shadowy horses and their riders passed him on the right. Apparently there'd been customers willing to take a private room at that old spook house of a hotel. On passing the man in the hall, Bligh had gotten the impression he was a traveling warrior. The other one with him was probably his wife.

Bligh finally turned and looked back. Lightning flashed. He would've killed for an umbrella. All five of the other figures were using their arms to shield their faces and heads. Fortunately most seemed to subscribe to the Frontier traveler tradition of not changing into pajamas, and all either had their baggage on their back or in hand.

What about the hotel staff? Bligh wondered.

He squinted his eyes in that direction just as the lightning flashed once more, and by its light he saw the rickety form of the two-story building fold like a house of cards.

They've had it, I guess.

At the same time the ground beneath him rumbled and shook, and behind the figures who fell, one after another, something big and black that could've been either a wall or a wave was rolling right that way. Just a bit ahead of it, there towered a steep cliff. Since the sides and top of it were devoid of plant life, if it collapsed the heavy downpour would swiftly turn it into a ravenous mud monster, bearing down on them and devouring everything in its path.

"This way. Hurry up!" Bligh shouted, pointing with one hand and running like a man possessed. He could hear the rumbling of the earth much closer.

It was five minutes later that he reached the bottom of the hill. He climbed it

without thought of anything else. Fortunately the slope wasn't very steep, but that also meant it would take some time to reach the summit.

Now that he was on the hill, he could finally let up a little bit. Trees were growing all over it, so it didn't seem likely to give way easily.

After about a minute's wait, the rest arrived one after another. There was a plump, oldish man in a jacket with a girl dressed in the inimitable fashion of a traveling country bumpkin, a strangely sexy middle-aged woman whose profession was evident at a glance, and a young couple who each appeared to be about twenty years old, give or take a year. He immediately knew the story behind the oldish man and the country girl, but he wasn't sure about the young couple. From the way they were dressed, they were probably a pair of sweethearts headed back home from a big town, perhaps even engaged to be married.

Lightning flashed. Everyone was soaked to the skin. Still, the rain kept on pounding them mercilessly and beating down on the hill.

"What the—!" Bligh exclaimed, straining his eyes.

The people had been transformed into inhabitants of a stark white world, and behind them something came into view that seemed out of a dream. She wore a dress as white as snow, her arms and neck were adorned with bracelets and necklaces of gold and jewels—yet all that could be taken away, and still her youthful beauty and lithe form would've burned themselves into the retinas of any who saw her, even in a blinding world of brilliant colors.

Bligh stared at her in amazement, forgetting the rain, the rumbling of the ground, even his own fate. Stared at her? No, the world had already been enveloped once again by darkness. Had it just been a fleeting illusion?

The trembling that reached him through the soles of his shoes shook Bligh back to his senses.

"Climb the hill. The landslide's nearly on top of us!" he shouted, taking the middle-aged woman by the hand and digging the toes of his shoes into the slope.

By the time they'd climbed to the top, all of them had reached the limits of their strength. Three of them were women. It was incredible they'd all made it that far.

The rain didn't let up in the least.

As the shadowy figures huffed for breath like beasts in their death throes, Bligh said to them, "Okay, we should be fine now. I don't see any landslide coming up this far."

Bligh looked down at the base of the hill. He couldn't see very well.

Lightning flashed.

The man's blood froze. His field of view was filled with a sea of churning mud.

"A-all the way up here?!" he stammered.

Mud surged up to his ankles. When it then quickly receded again, Bligh nearly grew catatonic.

From off to his left, someone asked, "What's wrong?" While the speaker was still wheezing for breath, the voice was full of vitality.

"Didn't you just see that?"

"See what?"

A fresh flash of lightning picked out the round-faced old man neatly dressed in a suit and tie, but Bligh's interest focused at the bottom of the hill. The snarling sea of mud was retreating. And quite clearly *back the way it had come*.

"What are the chances of that happening?" he groaned in spite of himself, but he actually got a reply.

"None at all!" Framed by the rain bouncing off him, the plump man quivered.

"The god of the mountain must've ordered it back or something, eh?"

"Actually, it looked more like it was avoiding the hill."

"This hill here?" Bligh looked all around, but he couldn't see anything. He had to wait for the lightning.

"What's that?" the plump man grunted, cupping a hand behind his ear.

Bligh, too, listened intently.

From up ahead there was the sound of hoofbeats. Two horses were approaching. By the time the pair halted beside them, Bligh had guessed the riders' identities. It could only be the couple who'd left the rest of them in their dust.

"I'm surprised you got away," the man said to them from the back of his steed.

To Bligh, he sounded high-handed. He wasn't at all concerned about their safety. Their continued survival surprised him only to the extent he questioned why they'd been spared. In other words, in his heart he believed they'd have been better off dead.

"Yeah, well, your horses were so fast, we had to speed up chasing you."

The man on the horse grinned. "Well, don't take it personally. We barely made it out alive ourselves. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Lyle Brennan—warrior."

"Sorry we ran off and left you to fend for yourselves," someone said in a sensuous voice, making Bligh recall there was a woman there, too. "I'm Josette—his wife."

"Both of you are warriors? Isn't that cozy?"

"Not my wife. She's just an ordinary woman."

"Beg pardon. My confusion came from her being just as quick to run away."

At the tail end of his sarcastic remark, Bligh felt something cold run down his spine. A powerful thirst for blood.

The warrior moved forward on his horse.

"Now, dear . . ."

Josette's voice halted his advance.

"Watch that mouth of yours," the warrior said in an intimidating tone crushed free of emotion, but the rain needled his words.

"Come, come now," the plump man said, stepping between them. "I'm Bambi

Arbuckle. Physician and procurer of women. A pleasure to meet you.” Ignoring Bligh, whose eyes had gone wide, he continued, “Since we’ve all been fortunate enough to be saved, it would be a shame for us to go killing each other now. As for the two of you—have you found nowhere on this hill where we might take shelter from the rain?”

“Over that way, there was one big old tree. Lots of branches to it, so it should be enough to keep the rain off us. It’ll probably let up by morning, anyway,” the warrior’s wife said in a tone that made it seem that she, at least, was sincere.

“Hear that, everybody?” Bligh called out in a tone that ceded nothing to the rain. He knew that the rest of them had gathered around him. “All we’ve gotta do is wait for sunup. Okay, just have to tough it out a little more. So, how far is it to this tree of yours?”

“Roughly five hundred yards.”

“Sheesh—is this hill as big as all that?”

“Bigger, probably. Even by the flashes of lightning, I couldn’t see all the way to the ends of it.”

“Wow.”

“At any rate, let’s get going. That girl and the lady I’ll take on my horse. The other one can ride with my husband.”

The girl Josette referred to was the one traveling with the plump man; the lady was the fairer half of the young couple. Who “the other one” was went without saying.

“Oh, that’ll be a great help!” the alluring woman said, gathering the hem of her nightgown and making a beeline for Brennan’s horse. Extending her hand, she said, “I’m Charlotte. Charmed to make your acquaintance.”

“Lyle Brennan.”

“You’re a warrior, didn’t you say? That’s marvelous!”

In the meantime, the girl and the young woman went over to Josette’s horse and introduced themselves.

“My name’s Beth.”

“I’m Emily.”

“Welcome. The trip’s only five hundred yards, but it’ll be a pleasure having you aboard.”

Just as the rider extended her hand and was about to take hold of the girl, the plump man grabbed his young charge by the collar and jerked her back.

“Just a minute—what do you think you’re doing?” Josette asked angrily.

“I believe I told you I’m a procurer of women. The girl’s merchandise I’m in the midst of delivering to the town of Gillian.”

Bligh and the others could only stare at him in amazement. He had indeed said he was a procurer. However, the plump man had looked so much like a courteous physician, it’d made them forget that fact completely.

“As such,” he continued, “I can’t have the girl leaving my side. Take that young lady’s beau with you instead.”

“No. I’m fine,” the young man protested.

To which Arbuckle replied, “Go on and climb aboard. You should conserve your strength, since there’s no telling what could come next. As I recall—”

“Get on,” Bligh also advised him, and the young man did so without further reluctance.

“Sorry I didn’t introduce myself sooner. Jan Rollin is the name,” he then said.

“The rest of you, wait here. Once we’ve unloaded everybody, we’ll be right back.”

With Josette’s words as a parting gift, the two horses dashed off.

Using both hands to shield his head, Bligh said, “We’ll catch a cold in this for sure, eh?”

“Uh-huh,” the plump man said with a nod, while the girl just lowered her head.

“Miss, just hang in there a little longer,” Bligh told the girl. He then inquired in a calculatedly rude tone, “So, old-timer, what was it you were about to recall, anyway?”

As a doctor, he was accustomed to more deference. Glaring at him, Arbuckle said, “A long time ago, this area had one of the Nobles’ facilities. According to the stories, it was a top secret laboratory built on direct orders from their Sacred Ancestor, no less.”

II

Though the eastern sky lightened, the rain didn’t abate. The tree was so massive it would’ve taken ten grown men just to link arms around its trunk, and its great leafy branches reached out in all directions like helping hands, granting sufficient shelter from the rain, though it could offer no aid in deciding what they should do next.

“I know it was a hard climb up the hill and all, but there’s really nothing to do but go back down again, head to the highway, and wait for a patrol wagon to come by.”

Brennan voiced his opposition to Bligh’s proposal, saying, “Look at this rain. First of all, wagons from the Capital won’t be running on time in this. Plus, I don’t quite think the landslide’s over completely. As a result, there’s a very good chance not just the road out to the highway but even the highway itself is buried in mud.”

“Yeah, but staying here’s not gonna solve anything, is it? If it’s like you say, rescue parties won’t be here for a week and a half or more. So we’ve got no choice but to go to them.”

As Bligh was refuting Brennan, he heard someone say, “Does it hurt?”

Arbuckle had noticed the girl was lying back against the tree trunk. She had a red handkerchief pressed to her right ankle, though the red dripping from it suggested that wasn’t the handkerchief’s true color.

“I cut it on a fallen branch,” the girl said, her lips twisting in pain. Apparently the sandals she wore hadn’t offered much protection.

“Let me have a look,” Arbuckle said, pushing the handkerchief aside and immediately smiling broadly. “It’s nothing serious. However, it wouldn’t do to have any strange germs get into the wound either. I’ll patch you right up.”

And with that, he opened a leather-bound suitcase and began rummaging through its contents.

“Look at that. The girl won’t be able to move. Which means he won’t be able to leave here, either. I guess we’ll just have to wait after all,” Brennan said triumphantly.

“I agree. I’ve had it with running here, there, and everywhere,” said Charlotte, her tone one of fatigue.

Each and every one of them was soaked from the rain and utterly exhausted. If rescue wasn’t soon in coming, they would be sapped mentally even more quickly than physically.

“Well, then I guess this is it for me,” Bligh said, standing up. “I leave the rest to you. Hang in there, everybody.”

Taking his saddlebags off the horse’s back and slinging them over his shoulder, he let out a single sigh before he began to walk away. No one tried to stop him, and Bligh had no qualms about leaving them.

Man, I sure am beat. That was his only thought.

It was at that moment the hill shook. A scream rang out. The quaking didn’t subside. The earth spun. The rain eddied, the dark clouds danced. The sky went around and around.

Bligh remembered letting out a cry of “Whoa!”

His footing was gone without warning, and after feeling like he’d fallen forever, Bligh finally passed out.

The man realized he’d just been slapped on the cheek.

Charlotte had her hand back to deliver another but relented, saying, “Well, good morning to you.”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Bligh was cautious, but he quickly sat up and surveyed his surroundings.

He was still at the base of that tree. It continued to rain. What about the

others? They were there. Every last one of them.

“Lucky bastards.”

The fortunate individuals in question were all gazing straight ahead. Bligh followed their lead. Or rather, that had been the first thing to catch his eye when he woke up. You might say he was confirming it now.

Little by little, something astonishing had begun to take shape. The ambiguous mist became a solid fog, forming up like clouds, solidifying.



“Hey . . . What the hell is that?”

The others must’ve heard him. However, no one responded.

It wasn’t a vast expanse of ground that spread before them. Filling their rain-hazed field of vision was a panoramic view of a soggy little village. Old-fashioned homes of sticks and mud, a type that could no longer be found even in the most far-flung corners of the Frontier, surrounded a central square, while the eastern edge of that square was bordered by a broad river running from north to south. On the flat land on the other side of the water were about twenty farmhouses and some other buildings that were probably storehouses for grain. About fifty yards north of there stood a sixty-foot-high tower that apparently served both as a lookout point and a sanctuary. Thick forests surrounded the village on all sides, and at its western edge was a rather high hill topped with solid-looking fortifications that challenged the heavens.

At first, Bligh thought it was an illusion. However, the damp walls of the houses glistening with the rain, the surface of the river pounded to a froth, and trees swaying from the rain’s beating soon convinced him that he was mistaken.

“Where the hell are we?”

That got an answer.

“I don’t know. Looks like a really old village,” said Charlotte.

“How’d we all end up here?” Bligh asked.

At his reasonable question, the alluring middle-aged woman shot a quick glance to the heavens and said, “As soon as you started to leave, the ground shook and spun around. While we were all knocked off our feet, we fell here. Given that, this would have to be somewhere underground, though it doesn’t really look that way at all, does it?”

Bligh nodded. His eyes flying from one place in the village to another, he said, “There’s no one around, is there?”

“Yeah, now you mention it,” Charlotte conceded with a nod.

There wasn’t a soul to be seen in the village square or on the streets. It was like a ghost town, yet it didn’t seem the least bit dilapidated. Put some people

in it, and the village would soon look like it was ready to begin its day.

“Emily,” someone said in a clingy tone, causing the two of them to turn.

About ten feet away, the young man named Jan was shaking his slumping sweetheart—Emily—by the shoulders. Her labored breathing could be heard all the way over where they were.

Arbuckle was nearby, and he inched closer on his knees and put his hand to Emily’s forehead. “She’s got an awful fever,” the plump man said. “Must’ve caught a cold. Exhaustion might also have a hand in it. If it gets any worse, she’ll come down with pneumonia in no time!”

“Let’s go to the village,” Jan said, looking around at the group.

“I’m against it,” Brennan asserted coldly. “An ancient village just pops up right in front of us all of a sudden. I don’t think there’s anything right about the place. And take a look at those fortifications. What are we supposed to do if there are Nobles lurking up there?”

“Do what you like. I’m going!”

Arbuckle’s decision surprised the group, but they quickly understood it. In his former location, Beth was slumped back against the tree trunk. Her face was flushed and her breathing ragged.

“She’s already got pneumonia. I’ve got to get her warmed up posthaste. What are the rest of you going to do?”

“I don’t want any part of it, either,” Bligh said, shaking his head. “No matter how you look at it, there’s something wrong with the place, and I’ve got no interest in heading over there. Best of luck to you all, okay? Soon as I’ve had a little rest, I’m getting out of here!”

“We’re leaving, too,” Brennan declared, looking at Bligh, who turned away in a snit. It seemed he didn’t like people copying him.

“Well, then off with the lot of you. Off you go. Happy trails,” Bligh told them, waving one hand as he leaned back against the tree trunk. Suddenly he noticed that Charlotte was beside him, and he said to her, “What’ll you do?”

“For starters, the same thing as you.”

“Huh?”

“After I’ve had some rest, then I’ll decide,” she said, sitting right down by his side.

Bligh sensed danger. *Is she plotting to make me her own personal bodyguard?*

“Well, I guess we’ll each go our own ways, then,” Brennan said, surveying the group once he was high in the saddle. Giving a nod to Josette beside him, he delivered a kick to his steed’s flanks.

The two horses began to canter away. Rebounding spray from the rain outlined both riders and mounts in white.

The entrance to the village was to the east. There was no palisade, probably on account of the Nobles’ castle. The creatures humans feared most, ironically, were the greatest safeguard against monsters and bandits.

“I’m sorry. Goodbye,” Josette said in parting.

Seemingly ignoring that, Arbuckle went over to Bligh and asked, “Are you sure you won’t go to the village with us?”

“Damn sure.”

“Don’t be that way. Granted, there’s something strange about the village. Beyond a doubt. But knowing that, we’re going there anyway because otherwise, the lives of those two innocent girls are certain to be lost. We’d like you to act as our bodyguard.”

“That’s rich talk from a flesh peddler. What are you talking about, *innocent*? Aren’t you the same son of a bitch who’s gonna sell one of those innocent young girls to the underworld to line your stinking pocket?”

“I’m speaking now as Arbuckle the physician.”

“Don’t try to spin this, you two-faced bastard,” Bligh snapped back. “Are you reading me? As soon as I finish resting up—”

The world was bleached white. By lightning. But that wasn’t the entire extent of it. With a roar to shake both heaven and earth, the colossal tree was split in two.

“Holy shit!” Bligh exclaimed, jumping up.

The others also got to their feet, or else tried to crawl away from the tree. A hundred-and-fifty-foot-tall tree being split lengthwise was a sight more than sufficient to leave them dumbstruck.

There was but the single sound of a tree falling. Both halves of the trunk had hit the ground at precisely the same time.

Once the wind and quaking had subsided, Bligh called out, “Everybody all right?”

Fortunately, they were all okay. However, their guardian angel against the wind and rain was no more.

“Let’s go to the village,” Arbuckle said, laying a hand on Bligh’s shoulder.

The man shook it off, grabbed his things, and started to walk away. Since half of the tree trunk was blocking the road, he’d have to detour around it.

Once he’d gone as far as the still smoking base of the tree, he turned and looked back. Everyone was looking in his direction. Charlotte was there, too.

If you’re waiting for an invitation, sorry to disappoint you.

Bligh turned around and started walking again. Something about this made him anxious. There was something important here that he was missing. The sudden appearance of a cyborg horse from behind the toppled tree proved it.

It was Brennan. Josette was on behind him, her arms wrapped limply around his waist. Brennan also had the reins to Josette’s cyborg horse in his grip.

“We’re going to the village,” Brennan said with distaste. “My wife got hit by a falling branch, and you can see the shape she’s in. You should turn back, too. The village doesn’t seem to want to let us leave.”

“Now you’re talking nonsense, too?” Bligh said, giving the warrior a scornful look. “I’m leaving. And I don’t think there’ll be any more branches falling.”

He started walking around the horse. Suddenly, his legs sank—or so it appeared, but then his body was neck-deep in the ground, which had been transformed into a morass. Though Bligh clawed at it wildly with hands and feet, he only succeeded in stirring the mud, and he was rapidly sinking. Soon, he

couldn't breathe.

Is this the end? despair whispered to him. *No, I've still got things to do. I'll be damned if I'll die in a place like this . . .*

His consciousness drifted away. He sought oxygen—and mud rushed into his lungs.

III

Something heavy was expelled from his mouth and nose, and oxygen came in. As Bligh coughed violently, flecks of mud flew from his stomach and chest.

"Are you okay? You sure are a lucky one, mister."

It was Charlotte again.

Less than tactfully, Bligh groaned, "You again?"

"Well, excuse me for living. But you should be happy, you know. It wasn't me that saved you."

"Huh?"

Before his stunned eyes, Charlotte's expression shifted strangely, and she replied, "By the time I ran over, you'd already been hauled out, you see."

"But who—"

"The one who did it was still right there. It was—"

Charlotte squinted her eyes. Her body was trembling. As if she'd just downed the dregs of fear. And it wasn't just because she was soaked to the skin like a drowned rat.

"It was a Noblewoman, no doubt about it."

"You can't be serious?!" Bligh exclaimed, eyes bulging, but half of that was an act. There really could be no doubt about it. Charlotte had seen the woman, too.

"She was wearing this pure white dress, with a necklace of gold and jewels hanging around her neck and down to her chest. And they were all the real thing, too. I didn't see any fangs, but those trinkets really seemed to suit her.

That's the real proof of being Nobility!"

"Where is she?"

"While I watched, she laid you down right here, and then—*poof!* she vanished like smoke."

Bligh didn't know what to say.

"No, just kidding. A huge bat came down from the sky, and she rode off on its back."

"That's a lie."

If it came to a question of which was less believable, it would definitely be the latter.

Charlotte threw her head back without another word and laughed. "Yeah, it's a lie. Lies, lies, lies. The whole world is made up of one hundred percent bullshit."

All Bligh could think was, *This is one strange woman.*

What was the true nature of the beauty who'd saved him—some manifestation of the will that didn't want them to leave the village? His interest was focused on that alone.

"Can you walk?" Charlotte asked.

"I think I can manage."

"Then go on and get walking in whatever direction suits you. I'm going to the village. Everyone else has already gone."

As the woman stood up again, Bligh finally remembered something he should do.

"Thank you," he said.

An odd expression flitted across the woman's face, and she asked, "What's that?"

"What—just, thank you."

"Ah, an expression of gratitude. It's been so long since I heard it, I'd forgotten

what it sounded like,” the woman said, starting to walk away. “Whatever you’re aiming to do, you’d better be quick about it,” she told him, “or you and me both are looking at pneumonia.”

And with rapid steps the woman vanished.

The rain continued to batter Bligh.

“Oh hell.”

With that single complaint he got to his feet, and then he, too, started toward the village at a jog.

They had all assembled in a large building that seemed to be some sort of local meeting house. The stone ceiling, walls, and floor were impervious to the rain. Surprisingly enough, there were rows of wooden chairs set up in the main hall, and an electric heater made of steel was glowing red. A pair of synthetic fiber mats had been laid out on the floor beside it, with Emily lying on one and Arbuckle’s charge, Beth, on the other. Both were in their underthings, but that was unavoidable. Their dripping-wet clothes were still where they’d been thrown on the floor. Josette or someone had probably put the girls in a dry change of underwear. There was no sign of Brennan or Jan—or Josette, for that matter. They’d no doubt gone off to search for necessary supplies.

“How’s the warrior’s wife doing?” Bligh asked Arbuckle.

Looking toward the windows, the procurer replied, “It was an incredibly superficial wound. After a little rest she was fine again, and went out with her husband to look for food and weapons.”

“I thought as much. How about those other two?”

“For the time being, an antifebrile is keeping the fever in check. Just getting them out of the rain was a great help.”

“And you had that fever medicine on you?”

“I am a doctor, after all.”

“Spare me, flesh peddler,” Bligh spat back.

As he was saying that, Charlotte walked past him and over to the plump man. “I’ll give you a hand once I get changed,” she told him.

“Most kind of you. This girl is one matter, but if I let the other one die, it may cost me my life.”

“You’re a doctor, so how’d you wind up running girls, eh?”

“The workings of the world.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Traveling bag in hand, Charlotte opened the door to the adjoining room and, after checking that it was safe, stepped inside and closed the door again.

“By the look of it, this was built three thousand years ago,” Bligh said, surveying the room. “They just stacked stone on stone, and threw in an electric heater. That’s it. But I’m surprised anything this old is still around.”

“Indeed. And without a speck of rust. Plus, the village has working electricity.”

Arbuckle’s words sent a chill through Bligh. *This village—it’s alive*, he thought. *Only, there aren’t any villagers around. No—*

“I’d say there’s someone here,” Arbuckle stated with a grin. It was one that could’ve been taken as either ironic or nihilistic. “New villagers, that is.”

Us, Bligh realized, and then he recalled what Arbuckle had said earlier. “Hey, is this the Noble lab you were talking about?”

“Yes, most likely.”

Emily turned a shocked look their way.

“An entire village from three millennia ago has turned up in pristine condition. Can you think of any other reason for that?”

“Why’d it come back?”

Arbuckle remained silent.

“Don’t worry on my account,” Emily said in an emotionless tone.

“We’re their new lab rats, aren’t we?” Bligh continued.

“Now, I wouldn’t exactly—”

“Can you think of anything else?”

Arbuckle put his hand against Emily’s forehead.

“No, that’s just too . . .” the pretty young lady groaned, turning her face away.

“Her fever’s come down a lot, but we can’t let our guard down just yet. I wrote them a note with the drugs we’ll need, but do you suppose there’s a doctor’s house around?”

“Not to worry,” Bligh replied. “The Nobility will fix her right up. Hell, they’ll even throw a little immortality into the bargain. Might not be so bad after all!”

“Stop it!” Emily cried, and though the doctor held her shoulders down, she shook her head forcefully. “You said something about being lab rats—what kind of experiments would they use us for?”

“That I don’t know. Only that they were top secret. But this was a facility built on direct orders from the legendary Sacred Ancestor. It wouldn’t be an ordinary blood-manufacturing plant.”

With Arbuckle’s words, a certain figure crept back into Bligh’s mind. *Is that Noblewoman in charge of the place or something?* It was strange that he didn’t actually speak these thoughts out loud. And he didn’t know why.

Bligh went over to the westward-facing windows and peered out through spotless glass. Beyond the rain and the swaying forest, he could see the fortifications. *The only way out of here is to go up there and talk to ‘em, is that it?* the man thought. It felt as though all the blood were draining from his body.

After he’d been looking out the window for a while, Charlotte returned, saying, “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

When Bligh turned around, he was expecting her to be covered with mud, but suddenly she was wearing a clean change of clothes. She’d been sexy even after the rain had washed off all her makeup, but now that she’d reapplied her cosmetics, she was alluring to a numbing degree. She gave off a deep aroma, like a lily whiter and more conspicuous than the moon.

“Why, whatever are you looking at?” she inquired in a tone that had confidence to spare.

“Nothing,” Bligh replied, playing dumb. No good could come of encouraging a woman like that.

Before long, the other three returned. At any rate, they had assembled all the essentials—dry clothes, blankets, flashlights and electric lamps, canned goods, jerky, a plastic tank of drinking water, cups and paper plates, forks and spoons.

“We found medicine, too,” Josette said, handing Arbuckle a plastic bag containing several white packages.

Pulling out a few of the boxes and taking some tablets from them, he filled some cups with water from the tank and made the girls down both.

“That puts Emily in the clear,” said Arbuckle, “but the other one’s not so simple. We’ve got to move her to a well-equipped hospital as soon as possible. Where did you find these drugs?”

“In the general store,” Jan replied. “There wasn’t a soul around, but it sure was well stocked.”

Taking a look at the box the medicine was in, Arbuckle said, “It was manufactured—almost three thousand years ago.”

That sent a stir through the crowd.

“That’s in keeping with the style of the houses,” he continued. “It would seem this village has been awaiting our arrival for the last three millennia.”

“What do you mean by that?” Jan asked. When Arbuckle explained about the laboratory, the color quickly drained from the young man. “What kind of place have we wound up in? Why the hell is this village even here? Where’s it been all this time?”

“Probably in that hill,” Arbuckle said.

“What?” Jan exclaimed, and he wasn’t the only one who bugged his eyes. They all did.

“I can’t say for certain,” the plump man continued, “but from what I saw during flashes of lightning, the top of the hill was about the same size as this village. When you think about the timing of its appearance, and the way we felt like we’d fallen underground but the next thing we knew we were back where

we started, it kind of makes sense. We're still up on top of that hill."

For a while, no one said anything.

"Okay, let's get ourselves something to eat and think about our next move," Bligh finally urged them.

"There are some tables and chairs in the prep room next door," said Charlotte.

All of them got changed and, while it wasn't quite a meal, they had something to eat. After that, the air of danger that'd been hanging over them dissipated and they settled down.

"I don't think we can expect to be left alone like this for long," Brennan stated in typical warrior fashion. "Until we destroy whatever it is that keeps interfering with any attempts to flee, we can't get out of the village. And it'll be night soon."

While all of them were put off by his deep voice and somewhat nasty tone, they could also sense the ugly truth that his words carried: *When night came, the dead went into action.*

"I want no part of any of this. How can we just sit back and wait for the Nobility to drink our blood? Doctor, would it be all right for me to leave and take Emily with me?" Jan Rollin asked, rapidly sinking into a manic state. It was plain to see from his wardrobe that he hadn't been born on the Frontier. His good fortune in not having to spend every day since childhood shoulder to shoulder with dread of the Nobility had now become his terrible misfortune.

"If you could find some way to keep her completely out of the wind and rain, I suppose it would be okay, but it's just plain impossible. Something will get in your way."

"We only came out to the Frontier on a sightseeing trip from the Capital. We didn't want to come into direct contact with the Nobility. Now that it looks that way, we'd like to get out of the village, the sooner the better."

"Why don't you try telling that to whoever's running the place," Arbuckle said. Seeming to have suddenly thought of something, he asked the Brennans, "Weren't there any weapons?"

“Nope, nothing. Not so much as a knife,” Josette replied, shaking her head.

“What’s the story with that? They wouldn’t even be able to fix dinner, would they?” Bligh said in an incredulous tone.

“It probably means the Nobility had to take good care of their lab rats. Give them all the food and water they want. Protect them from external threats. They’d have no need for weapons.”

“In that case, I guess we’ve no choice but to cut some wood and sharpen it to a point, eh?”

“Right you are, *Doctor*,” Brennan concurred, though he seemed to append the title as a dig at the man. “All of you probably have at least a pocket knife on you. We brought back some wood for stakes. Now, let’s get whittling.”

And saying that, he took a paper bag he’d kept set down away from all the other supplies they’d laid out and dumped its contents on the floor. What spilled from it was a bunch of branches that’d all been cut a little over two feet long.

The Expedition

chapter 2

I

The very first to grab a stick was Bligh. On seeing the way it'd been cut, he groaned on the inside.

I might not care for that bastard, but the whole warrior thing sure ain't for show. This thing looks like it was cut with a laser.

Not wanting to scrutinize him too long or too hard, Bligh had been looking away most of the time, but now that things had settled down and he got a good look at the man, he saw that Brennan had a rugged, angular face and build, with battered armor covering him from the chest down to the very tips of his fingers and toes. Both his garb and the crossed set of longswords he wore on his back seemed to give off the stench of blood. The man had definitely been hardened in the fires of a hundred battles.

The wife, in contrast to her beast of husband, was a beauty of a woman with a slender face that gave an impression of tranquility. There was also a terrible air of nihilism about her, as if she were a negative image of her husband. However, she wore the same kind of protective armor. Though she had no sword, the “carrier” she wore on her back had a weapon that put her husband's to shame—a belt-fed 20mm minigun, complete with a five-thousand-round ammo box. The woman was able to carry a hundred and fifty pounds of guns and ammunition thanks to the scientific miracle of the “carrier,” which reduced her load to practically zero. It hardly let her pass for an “ordinary woman.”

To either side of her waist, rails extended from the “carrier,” making it easy to shoot from the hip. Once the shooter got their target in the display screen of their eyepiece, all they had to do was press the firing button and let fly with a stream of polymer steel rounds that could punch through four inches of metal plating. Of all the monsters the Nobility had scattered across the earth, the great fire dragons were said to have the toughest armor, and nothing save that beast could withstand such a barrage. Of course, the price of such a weapon was astronomical, probably enough to purchase an entire small village out on the Frontier. Regardless of whether they’d gotten it by force or through negotiations, the fact that they had it made it clear this was no ordinary married couple.

Bligh pulled a survival tool called an “s-device” from a case he wore on the back of his belt. A footlong mass of metal, it could be used for cutting with a single thrust, blow, or pull, depending on how one held it. It also had a magnifying glass built into it, so starting fires wasn’t a problem. There were blades of varying thicknesses, and by changing the angle one could either split a rock in two or peel an apple.

Not surprisingly, the device caught Brennan’s eyes, and the man said to Bligh, “Handy little contraption you’ve got there.”

“Yeah. Bought it off an arms merchant. Lately they let you do financing, which really helped!”

“Let me have a look at it.”

“Sorry, but no,” Bligh replied. He hadn’t liked the way the warrior had said that. Nor did he care for how quick the man was to put his hand out.

“You and me haven’t got along from the very start, you son of a bitch.”

A deafening silence fell. The truth of Brennan’s words was common knowledge. To be honest, all of them had known this could explode at any moment. More to the point, they were probably wishing it’d just explode already and get it all over with.

However, it was Josette who put a stop to things, saying, “Dear . . .”

From the way his wife was dressed and her character in general, it was a

perfectly natural thing for her to do.

But Brennan barked at her, “Keep your damn mouth shut!”

“Would you please just stop this?” Arbuckle then interrupted.

“Hey, you old flesh peddler.”

“That’s me,” the corpulent man said, raising his right hand. “Let’s stop fighting amongst ourselves for the time being. Don’t forget we’re smack dab in the middle of a facility run by bloodthirsty Nobles. If we intend to survive, we’ll all need to cooperate. Even a single minor injury is more than we can afford.”

Truer words were never spoken.

“He’s right, dear!” Josette said in a hard tone.

Bligh felt a horribly cold determination in it. If he’d had to put it into words —*Does she intend to shoot her hubby?*

The situation was resolved in the most appropriate fashion.

“Okay,” Brennan said, turning away sulkily. Before he did, however, he said, “But we’re gonna settle up sooner or later, fugitive.”

“Hmm. What gave me away?” Bligh replied, though it was clear from his tone he was joking.

Brennan’s answer was deadly serious. “What kind of ordinary Frontiersman would be walking around with a weapon like that? It takes a decade just to get the hang of it. Plus, you seem to be in more of a hurry than any of the rest of us. Because someone’s on your tail. And, finally—when you look at yourself, do you see an upstanding person?”

“Well, if that don’t beat all,” Bligh said, rubbing his face with both hands. “If that’s the way it looks to you, guess there ain’t much I can do. Sure, I’ve got the look of a wanted man. So, yes, sir, whatever you say.”

Sitting down in front of a window, Bligh began shaving the end of the branch to a point. Curls of wood fell as if he were merely skinning an apple, and in no time at all he’d fashioned some keen anti-Noble weapons, drawing sounds of surprise from Arbuckle and Charlotte. In the time it’d taken him to make three stakes, Arbuckle and Jan still hadn’t finished their first.

Bligh took a long stake—actually, closer to a short spear—and sharpened the opposite end to a point, too. On seeing that he went on to put notches around the middle of it, Josette narrowed her gaze and asked, “What’s that you’re doing there?”

“I figure there are times when just one stab won’t do the trick. Then you can snap it off, and you’ve got another one.”

“You sure you’re not really a fugitive?” the warrior’s wife said, making no attempt to conceal her surprise. “You seem more accustomed to battle than we are—”

Just then, a mass of black slammed into her cheek, sending her backward.

Stepping in front of the reeling Josette, Bligh glared at her attacker and snarled, “What the hell was that for?!”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Brennan replied, rubbing his fist as he turned around.

“You son of a bitch!”

“Don’t. It’s fine. It was my mistake,” the woman said.

“Yeah, but—”

“I shouldn’t have said *we*. That’s all.”

“That’s all?! What the hell?!” Bligh exclaimed, still ready to make a stand, but Arbuckle clamped down on his shoulder. “Stay out of my way. I’m gonna punch that asshole’s lights out.”

“Do that, and you’re likely to just bring down more wrath on his wife. It boils down to the question of pride. Surely you can see that, can’t you?”

Turning to face the woman, Bligh asked, “You sure it’s all right?”

“Yeah,” she answered, holding her cheek. A blow like that would be sure to leave a bruise.

Bligh felt he was getting a clear picture of the couple’s relationship, but he shook his head to drive the images away.

“Well, then it ain’t for me to say otherwise. See you folks later.”

And raising one hand, the man headed for the front hall.

“Where are you going?” an agitated Arbuckle inquired.

“To the Nobles’ mansion, of course. Didn’t you hear? They’re having a dance party today. I got an engraved invitation and everything. I’ll be the only human there. The invite said to come in casual attire, and kindly bring a fresh wooden stake.”

“Hey, hold on a minute.”

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry. See, I’d like to be back here before sundown.”

“Heading up there alone is crazy!” said Jan.

“People come into this world alone, kid,” Bligh replied with a smile. “And they’re alone again when they die. Funny how that works, eh?”

“No, you’re wrong,” a woman’s voice said, pulling the man back just as he was about to make a heroic exit. It was Charlotte.

“How’s that?”

“When a baby’s born, there’s a doctor there to deliver it. Or even if there wasn’t a doctor, your mother was there to give birth to you, right? And when you die, your wife will be there taking care of you.”

“Sorry, you’re wrong there. Ain’t got a wife.”

“You can be a real pain, you know that? At any rate, you need a woman with you, so I’ll go. I’ve finished making a stake and everything.”

“Uh, you’d just be in the way.”

“That’s right,” said another female voice, the words striking Bligh’s shoulder. “If an amateur goes, any trouble will just get chalked up to her being a woman. I’ll accompany him.”

The voice was that of Josette Brennan.

II

“You sure it’s okay, me borrowing his horse? Hubby’s gonna blow his top!”

“I don’t care. For what it’s worth, he did say no,” Josette remarked, smiling

faintly. Beneath the plastic raincoat she'd procured at the general store, her black hair rolled in waves.

The rain continued to fall.

As he kept his balance high in the saddle, Bligh thought, *Your husband told you not to!* but he didn't actually say it.

Crossing the river, the two of them were about to enter the forest. From there, they would turn north and head for the fortifications.

"Maybe it's natural for midday, but ain't it creepy, how quiet it is?"

"Really? You seem used to it."

"What, to dead villages?"

"To death in general."

"Spare me. If anyone was, it'd have to be the two of—"

"Yes, I suppose so. But you never get used to it. At least, I haven't."

"It doesn't look that way at all," Bligh said, his gaze falling on the weapon on Josette's back, then bouncing off it again.

The world of gloom only grew darker. For they'd entered the forest.

Before they'd gone a hundred yards, Bligh wanted nothing more than to turn around and go back.

"What's the deal with this forest?"

Due to the rain, he knew they wouldn't hear any birds singing. However, there were no rabbits or other little critters to be seen scampering about—nor any indications that any were around, which was a bit much to believe. Creatures like squirrels lived in the trunks of trees, bark-eating scales slept beneath the bark, moles wriggled through the earth, jump bugs sprang around in the grass, winged insects sailed through the air, water beetles skittered across puddles, and deer and the like beat small paths—all of which breathed life into a place that travelers could feel. And yet, in this forest there was none of that. Though the rain-drenched plants and trees glistened sharp and fresh, like a lovely painting, there was no pulse of life to be felt from this place.

“What do you expect? It’s a forest on the Nobility’s lands.”

Josette’s words drew a sideward glance from Bligh.

“Once, I passed through lands where an ancient Noble still held sway. There were people there, but they had no spring to them, like they were all dead, and not a single birdsong rang through the forests.”

“Cripes,” said the man.

“About two years later, I passed through the same lands, and it was like a whole different world. Everybody was so full of life, and the forest positively teemed with the sounds of animals. Seems it got like that after a Hunter came through a year earlier and slew the Noble.”

“Yeah, a Noble. The thing is, I hear a lot about ’em, but since I ain’t ever been around one, I just don’t got a handle on ’em. You mean to tell me there are humans who can take down Nobility? I thought the Nobility kept their graves well-guarded during the daytime, so getting to ’em was no easy task.”

“There are exceptions, I suppose. Dhampirs, for example.”

Ice water coursed down Bligh’s back, and he shuddered in spite of himself. In the forest it was four or five degrees cooler than outside, and rain was pouring down, but neither was responsible for his trembling.

Dhampir. The very word was cursed.

“Is it true they’re all really ugly looking, like the undead, and they can use witchcraft? Or that their arms and legs are all weird and twisted, and they’ve got another face on their backs?”

“Damned if I know. I’ve never met one.”

“What? But some of ’em are warriors, too. Almost all dhampirs wind up as either Vampire Hunters or warriors. You ain’t made acquaintances with any of ’em?”

“We’re not good at making friends.”

“Well, I can see that about your hubby,” Bligh said before looking up at the sky. “Shit. When is this goddamned rain gonna let up? Got nothing better to do than slow folks down.”

“I see. Seems you’re in a hurry to hit the road, eh?” Josette said, a wry grin rising on her lips.

“No, I ain’t in a hurry to hit the road, exactly. But there’s somewhere I definitely need to be.”

“So badly you’d barge into a Noble’s mansion with no more than a stake?”

“Well, it’s that important to me. Besides, I’ve got more than just a stake. And it’s still daytime, after all.”

Suddenly seeming to have recalled something, Josette pulled back on her horse’s reins. “Oh, that’s right. Did you know the Nobility had intended to put out the sun?”

Bligh bugged his eyes. Though he’d heard various anecdotes about the Nobility, this was a new one on him.

“Put out *the sun*? C’mon. Even for the Nobility, that’s going a bit far.”

“Why do you suppose they didn’t do it? A planet like this, where one side’s always sure to be facing the sun, has really got to be about the worst place in the universe for the Nobility to live. A permanent city was constructed for them on the dark side of the moon, and they say their exploration parties went as far as Alpha Centauri. After all, we’re talking about folks who’ve got immortality and indestructibility working for them. They don’t need any of the suspended animation chambers ancient humans dreamed up, and if a major accident were to happen, they could go outside and repair their ship without even wearing a spacesuit. And they’d be happy as a clam no matter how bad the radiation or cosmic rays might be out there. They could breathe a pure hydrogen sulfide atmosphere like it was fresh air, and a freezing cold planet would still seem like paradise to them. In all the vast universe, there couldn’t have been many creatures like that, so efficient at survival they needed no food so long as they had dehydrated blood.”

“Then shouldn’t they have gone out into the universe more?” Bligh asked.

“From what I hear, anybody as sharp as the Nobility could’ve made a ship that’d fly at the speed of light. Though damned if I know what light has to do with any of this.”

“There are two theories about that. One is that it’s some kind of psychological taboo for the Nobility. The example I always hear is the fact that the city on the dark side of the moon was abandoned before a century had passed. In other words, the theory is that the Nobility actually *love* the light. That had something to do with the beginning of their mysterious decline a few millennia ago. The second one involves *them*—the OSB.”

“The outer space beings?”

“Yeah. Five thousand years ago a battle started between the Nobility and the first alien race they encountered, and it went on for two millennia. The theory goes that the war was a crushing blow to the core of the Nobility, and one they never fully recovered from. Just between the two of us, it seems the Sacred Ancestor’s personal interests picked up speed during that era.”

“What kind of interests are we talking about?”

“I don’t really know. But I’ve heard it involved dissecting humans and OSB.”

“Dissection? The guy some kind of freak?!”

Suddenly, the ground shook.

The cyborg horses were about to go wild, prompting the two riders to madly pull on the reins and stroke the beasts.

“See, what did I tell you? Speak ill of the Sacred Ancestor on the Nobility’s lands, and dead humans and Nobles alike will come out of their graves to tear you to shreds.”

“Whatever you say, ma’am.”

That was the last thing said, and the pair then rode through the forest in silence, reaching the foot of the hill in less than twenty minutes. The road twisted up a gentle slope all the way to the Nobles’ castle.

“The Nobles’ castle isn’t old at all—no chance it’s empty, eh?” Josette said, and when she moved her right hand, the minigun on her back slid down the rail on the right-hand side. Thanks to a remote-control firing mechanism and the flexible arm mounting, the weapon could target anywhere.

Josette’s body was trembling faintly. She knew all too well they weren’t going

to be exploring a vacant house.

It was an easy enough climb up the stone-paved road. Raising a hand to shield themselves from the rain, each of them looked up at the towering stone walls. The first thing that struck them about the fortifications was how rough the outer walls seemed.

The so-called “nostalgic tastes of the Nobility” varied in different eras, but for the most part they could be grouped under the heading “elegant.” Many of their mansions were done in the baroque style of ancient times, and characteristically on the Frontier they were more properly called castles or fortresses. An interesting point was that even at their height, the Nobility built castles for battling those under their banner who resisted and collected weapons for wholesale slaughter, and these proved a great contribution to the later OSB War, considered a shining beacon of “foresight” in the history of the Nobility. During two millennia of fighting against the OSB, what had the most splendid results and checked the alien invasion were the fortresses and castles of the Frontier, as well as the factories there that produced weapons and facilities that ensured a constant power supply.

After the lengthy war, the lords of the Frontier took great pride in their ravaged castles, rebuilding them with even rougher, stronger walls. Also, rather than modernize the Frontier, they seemed determined to send it even further into the past, releasing even more vicious, primitive monsters, though that would later be taken as a symbol of their own “period of ebb” that followed. It was at this time that the fortresses that even now kept the Frontier a domain of fear were constructed. But history only considered those who moved forward as its legitimate children. In no time, the Nobles’ civilization had been swallowed up by the waves of their species’ decline, and at present they showed no signs of bobbing to the surface again.

However, the fortifications that the two humans now looked up at still retained the coarse image of Frontier Nobility, looming over the human race, not wavering in the least. There was a gate set in the ramparts. The rivet-studded, black iron doors were the first problem the pair would need to deal with. At any rate, all they could do was try giving them a push.

Bligh dismounted and reached out his hand for the gleaming black metal. The

instant his fingers made contact, the doors swung back from the center, opening.

“Hey, there’s somebody here!” Bligh exclaimed after getting back in the saddle, and Josette nodded at his words.

However, they passed through the gate and went into the front yard without seeing a single person.

“They’re treating us like idiots. I ain’t about to let a castle screw with me!” the man growled. “So, in a castle like this, where would they put the graves?” the man asked, apparently having quickly reclaimed his reason.

“One of three spots. A graveyard on the grounds, in a chapel, or underground.”

“Ain’t got much time. Which has the highest chances?”

“The chapel, I suppose.”

“By chapel, you mean some kind of holy place for praying to God?”

“That’s right.”

“Why the hell would a nest of vampires have something like that?”

“It must suit their tastes.”

“Damned if I understand,” Bligh said, tilting his head to one side and driving away a question he’d had for many years.

The interior was rough and entirely rustic in feel, devoid of both the influence of gothic elegance and the style researchers had termed *ultramodern*. Apparently Josette was accustomed to this, and aside from one or two mistakes she guided Bligh to the door they sought. But there in the vast place for supplications to God, which was like an enormous hall, they couldn’t find a single coffin.

After checking the floor and walls—anywhere a coffin might be stashed—Josette said, “In that case, it must be underground. If they were buried out in the cemetery, they’d be spotted right away. It would have to be the worst place of all.”

“Well, there ain’t much we can do about that. Can’t really turn tail ’cause we’re spooked after coming all this way.”

“That’s the spirit!”

The pair’s eyes were riveted to an iron door at the far end of the chapel.

“Well, look at that,” Bligh said, adjusting his grip on a long stake.

The iron door was open. But when they’d entered the chamber, he was certain it’d been closed.

After the pair had set out, the two girls’ conditions had become marginally stable, setting the minds of their caretakers Jan and Arbuckle at ease. The other one there—Brennan—didn’t help at all, but rather stared out the window into the rain.

“If you’re so concerned, why don’t you go after them?” Arbuckle said to him.

Turning, Brennan said, “My wife’s got a bit of warrior in her, too. She calls her own shots.”

“You said at the outset she was just an ordinary woman. Was that because it was to your advantage to have everyone believe so? Looking at the two of you, you don’t seem all that independent.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What indeed,” Arbuckle replied cryptically, turning away in a snit.

A shadow fell across his face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the warrior repeated, standing now by the plump man’s side.

“Hey! Knock it off!” an agitated Charlotte called over from where she’d been watching this develop. “This is hardly the time for squabbling, is it? If we don’t work together, we’re not gonna make it out of here alive!”

“I can make it out of here on my own,” Brennan said, his eyes giving off a weird gleam. “If trouble starts, you folks are the ones that’ve had it.”

“You’re right, so just stop this. Don’t go wasting your abilities like this—and

you need to keep the peace, too.”

Jan, who was watching over his beloved, snapped to attention, saying, “She’s right. Please, just stop it. I saw something in a guidebook back in the Capital. These parts were once a battlefield where the OSB fought the Nobility. It might just be that *both sides* lured us to the village.”

“Huh?” the physician Arbuckle exclaimed, his expression changing. He was facing one of the windows. “What’s that out there?”

Beneath the leaden sky, they all saw a black streak descending at an angle. It was neither bird nor flying monstrosity. It was a manufactured flying machine.

“It can’t be—” Charlotte groaned. She recalled what Jan had just said. The OSB—outer space beings.

Minds blanked, they all saw the glittering silver craft at the fore of that black smoke.

“It went down behind the castle!”

A few seconds later, a fireball erupted from the very place Jan had said.

III

Although they didn’t see the flames from the chapel, the roar and the quaking of the ground reached the pair.

“What the hell was that?” said Bligh.

“It was pretty close to here!”

The two of them sped into action. Behind them, the door leading underground slowly closed. There was a certain sadness to it.

Not confident that they could navigate through the castle interior and out the back, the pair went back to the main entrance and got on their cyborg horses. Circling around the castle’s outer walls, they reached the back.

The first thing they saw hit them like a knife in the eye.

“Sheesh,” Bligh groaned, while Josette was left speechless.

Less than a thousand yards away—where the aircraft had apparently crashed

—there were flames. However, the vast plain spreading before them was covered as far as the eye could see with the wreckage of countless machines. There were what had apparently been aircraft over a mile and a quarter in length; engines for tanks that were fifty yards in length, width, and height; the lower half of a titanic warrior that looked like it would've stood sixty feet high; the heads of stone men weighing five thousand tons each, as well as the primitive spears they used and dimensional blades—all of these things were half destroyed, melted, beaten by wind and rain for millennia, littering the plain and surrounding wilderness, but scattered among them were objects in shapes and colors clearly at odds with earthly physics.

“This was a battlefield for the OSB and the Nobility,” Bligh murmured in the tone of one who'd lost his soul.

“So it appears. The aircraft went down there,” Josette said, but her eyes were vacant too.

Feeling as if they'd wandered into a land of giants, the pair galloped through the rain. A shattered man of stone had his face turned toward them, the path ahead was blocked by the arms and legs of mechanized giants, and the wind whistled across this land of the dead. And then there was the rain. If not for the raging flames, the pair might've turned back along the way. From their first glance at the wreck, they knew there was no hope of rescuing anyone. Unless they'd bailed out on the way down, there was no way anyone could've survived the scorching flames and blistering hell that even now buffeted the faces of the pair. It was so bad that Bligh had to wonder if the scalding heat wouldn't bring the dead who'd lain here for millennia back to life. Out of the Frontier, such things often went beyond the point of mere speculation.

“Think we oughta go?” Bligh asked.

“Yeah,” Josette replied, and she was just about to wheel her steed around when she suddenly jerked back on the reins. Pointing into the flames, she exclaimed, “What's that?!”

Bligh was already facing the other way, and when he turned back the two of them witnessed a black figure slowly walking toward them through the swirling palette of blistering heat.

“No way—”

“No, he’s alive!”

Those were the only words they exchanged before the figure stepped from the flames. Actually, fire still enveloped him from head to toe. Advancing to within five yards of the speechless pair of spectators, the anthropomorphic fireball extended his left hand by his side. Suddenly the flames coursed across his body like a stream, being sucked into the palm of his hand while the pair stared with disbelief. Once the last tongue of flame had been swallowed, a man in black garb was laid bare to the pounding rain. In a wide-brimmed traveler’s hat and a coat the hue of night, he had an elegantly curved longsword across his back—and though it was incredible that none of his trappings showed any trace of the flames, what left both of them speechless and frozen in place was the man’s beauty. Here was the radiance of youth so many geniuses had tried to capture in paint, song, and prose. Ah, but none of them had been able to express it. Because the light of this beauty didn’t belong to the human race. It was the glow of angels and saints.

Without even realizing it, Josette had her hand pressed to her heart. She thought she should probably say something, but the beauty of his face was such that she couldn’t get out a word, and the man started to walk right past Bligh.

“Hey, wait!” the flustered Bligh cried out to him. “How’d you make it out of them flames? Were there any other survivors? If so, we’d better go save ’em!”

“It’s no use,” the figure in black said over his shoulder. The rain spattered off him.

Yeah, you’ve got a point, Bligh thought knowingly. But that being the case, he had a million things to ask the man. Swiftly wheeling his steed around, Bligh caught up with the man. “You’re lucky you survived, but you’re still in a world of hurt. This is a Noble testing ground. You splashed down in an old Noble/OSB battlefield. Did you know that?”

Before the man could answer, Josette said in a conclusive tone, “You—you’re a Hunter, aren’t you? And I don’t mean the garden variety. A Vampire Hunter.”

There was no reply.

Bligh's eyes were bugged out.

Josette continued, "If so, you must've been sent from heaven above. The will of the Nobility lives on here. Or maybe the Nobles themselves are still hale and hearty."

The young man in black halted. It wasn't that he'd taken an interest in the pair's words. He'd merely reached the crest of the path. To the left, the rear wall of the castle loomed. He was taking in the panorama of the rain-shrouded village below.

Something's starting here, Bligh thought, certain of himself. His body trembled, and not due to the chill of the rain. *Something intense is gonna happen, a lot worse than anything we could've done. On account of this guy.*

Bligh realized it was already too late. From the instant the gorgeous young man had appeared, everything had started to flow in another direction. While he knew that wouldn't necessarily be the way they wanted things to go, the realization that there was nothing they could do was pounded into Bligh the same way the rain hammered the ground.

"Bligh's the name—I'm a drifter."

"I'm Josette Brennan—a warrior's wife."

"D," he replied with surprising speed.

Sensing something racing through every inch of Josette's body, Bligh looked over his shoulder. Surprise was just spreading across her slim, lovely countenance. It was immediately consumed by admiration, which was in turn devoured by yet another emotion—fear.

"D . . ." the warrior's wife parroted, a blank look on her face. She took off her vinyl covering. "Here—put this on."

The young man who'd introduced himself as D just turned his face away a bit from the raincoat she proffered, saying, "No, thanks, but I appreciate the offer."

Though Josette dazedly pulled the vinyl garment back, she made no attempt to put it back on.

"Hey, you don't mean to tell me—" Bligh began to say in a perplexed tone.

Was she doing that as a sign of respect?

D started walking. He headed down the sloping path without even glancing at the fortifications. And the other two followed after him. They didn't feel much like going back to the castle. After all, the strength had been entirely drained from them. They were like children playing with plastic swords when a swordsman with a real blade had suddenly shown up—the difference seemed that staggering.

When they were halfway down the slope, a dull sound reverberated from the backyard. A door had closed. A short time later, there was another.

"What the hell was that? We leave a door open when we came out here?" Bligh mused, twisting his upper body around for a look at the castle.

"No, they're calling to us," Josette replied. "Or perhaps cursing us. For getting away."

"You mean they were waiting for us?"

"Yeah, probably," she answered, and then she gave a hard and decidedly unladylike look at D's back. "What do you think?"

She got an immediate reply.

"Better think about what comes next. This village is full of danger."

The two of them were rendered speechless. They remained so all the way back to the meeting house.

Just as they were about to dismount from their cyborg steeds, Bligh and Josette involuntarily cried out in disappointment.

D hadn't halted, but rather was continuing on straight toward the main entrance to the village.

"Hey, just a second there! You mean to tell me you're leaving?!"

"It's no use," said the woman. "You can't get out."

Though he seemed to be walking at a leisurely pace, D was putting distance between them like a speed walker, and they couldn't let that stand. The two of

them knew perfectly well that their fates depended on the beautiful young man.

“I’m gonna go after him and try talking some sense into him,” said Bligh. “You should head back.”

“Okay. See if you can do something.”

“Just leave it to me,” he replied with a thump of his chest, but they both knew it was a show of false bravado.

Bligh galloped along on his horse until he was alongside D. Immediately dismounting, he took a place by D’s left. “Okay, just hear me out,” he began, giving the young man a brief recap of the situation up until now and informing him of their own failed attempts to escape. The only interest D showed was in the part where a woman had saved Bligh from a muddy snare.

“What sort of woman?”

“Well, you see, she had on this pure white dress, with black hair all the way down to her waist—and in the end, she rode off on a huge goddamned bat. I shit you not!”

At that point, a hoarse, raspy voice that hardly seemed like it could belong to D said from somewhere, “Duchess Heldarling?”

“What?” Bligh said, looking all about in spite of himself, but there was no one else around.

In that case, was that D just now? And him with a face like that! Is this what they mean when they talk about Nobles going back to their true age an instant before they die? The question was just about to flop from his mouth like too much bread and ham he’d bitten off, but of course Bligh wasn’t stupid enough to actually ask it.

“Could be,” D replied.

As the man had thought, there was definitely a second presence here, but where was he—or it?

“So, just who’s this Heldarling?” the man inquired, and then gunshots echoed behind him.

It wasn't the conventional crack of a rifle. Rather, it was the sound of a burst of fire from a high-caliber minigun. It died down. And then—another burst.

Shadows Lurking In The Village

chapter 3

I

As soon as she set foot in the meeting house, Josette noticed something was wrong. No one was there. The heater was still blazing. Blankets were spread out where Beth and Emily had lain, and damp clothes hung over chairs by the heater. Everyone's bags sat in the first place she looked—meaning they hadn't been touched. The room was warmer than it'd been when they left. If they'd all gone somewhere, or made good their escape, it had to have been a good while ago. Or had they simply disappeared? The phrase *spirited away* flashed through her brain.

Where could they have gone, leaving all their baggage behind and not even bothering to turn off the heater?

Josette shifted the high-caliber minigun down by her hip. While flicking off the safety, she simultaneously activated the box of ammunition on her back, creating some slack in the ammo belt so she could fire without it jamming.

The strangeness of this occurrence drove deeper into Josette's heart with each passing moment. If the group had encountered some hostile force, her husband wouldn't have gone without leaving some signs of a fight.

Were they really spirited away after all?

Bolstered by her impatience, Josette's ears caught a faint thump. Turning on reflex, she ended up facing the door that led to the adjoining room. It was

closed. She heard something again. Footsteps. She listened intently. They were approaching the door. They stopped just shy of it. And didn't move.

"Who's there?" Josette asked in a low voice.

There was no reply.

"It's me," said the woman. "I'm back now. Nothing's wrong, so come on out."

Shifting the barrel of her weapon from the door to the wall about a yard away, Josette hit the firing button. Even the touch of a baby's finger would've been enough to trigger it. The minigun shook. The flexible arm absorbed the vibrations. Even at the full auto setting of two thousand rounds per minute, she could keep a bead on a foe a thousand yards away—although the enemy would be shredded.

The ten-round burst opened a ten-foot-wide hole in the wall. Through it, a white figure could be glimpsed bolting to the right.

"I saw that!"

The words were accompanied by another barrage, but it had already occurred to the woman that she shouldn't kill whoever this was. Relenting after a second ten-round burst, she returned the minigun to her back and drew the pistol from her hip. She was facing the back of the meeting house. Nobody was there. No one at all.

"Whoever you are, come on out!"

Although Josette didn't notice it at the time, on the floor about six feet to her right a pale man's hand appeared stealthily, and it slowly began knifing across the stone floor as if it were water, bound for her ankle. Opening and closing in an unsettling manner, the hand's fingers were just about to touch her boot, but grabbed empty air instead.

There was a man's cry from the hall, and Josette began walking in that direction, saved by the veritable hair's breadth.

The hand curled its fingers in regret, and then once more sank through the stone floor.

“What’s going on?” asked the pale-faced Bligh.

“See for yourself!” Josette replied, going on to tell him of everyone’s disappearance. On hearing that the target of her fire had been a white figure, Bligh looked as if he’d been run through the heart.

“What is it?”

“Er, nothing,” the man replied. There was no point in telling her about it now.

“We were brought here because they needed people, weren’t we?”

“Could be,” the man conceded.

“So, what happened to D?”

Seeing the way Josette’s face fogged over with rapture, Bligh wasn’t disgusted, but rather acknowledged that it was only natural.

“I ain’t never seen anybody so pig-headed before. Even after hearing the gunfire, he just kept right on going.”

Josette heaved a sigh. Bligh sensed this was due not so much to the disappointment of him not joining them as to his failure to say goodbye.

“We ain’t safe here, either. Think we oughta relocate to a house somewhere?”

“Would we be safe there?”

“Nope,” Bligh said with a grave shake of his head. “Still, it’d be better than here. Let’s get going. Luckily, our bags are still here.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Josette replied with a nod, acquiescing with startling ease. But such was to be expected from a warrior’s wife.

Gathering up everyone’s baggage, the two of them went outside. Josette, who stood at the fore, drew a deep breath.

A black figure was approaching through the blurry curtain of rain.

“I’ll be damned,” said the woman, her voice carrying tension and fear—and expectation.

That expectation was met. About six feet shy of the pair, the figure took

shape as D.

“You folks moving house?”

Josette was about to lose her mind. D’s voice had been so hoarse, he sounded like a hundred-year-old codger.

On seeing how she was looking all around, Bligh felt a small sense of satisfaction.

“Everyone’s vanished on us. Only their bags were left. I saw something white and opened fire on it, but it ran off before I could find out what it was. So we figured we’d hole up somewhere else.”

“Got someplace in mind?”

Now, it was relief that nearly drove Josette out of her mind. For D had spoken in his normal voice.

“No, but I was thinking maybe we’d pop in to a nearby farmhouse or something.”

Saying nothing, D turned.

Following his lead and noticing what it was he faced, Josette and Bligh gasped and swallowed hard.

Due to the increased impetus of the rain, they could make out no more than a hazy shape, but it was—the fortress.

“Oh, come on! That’s a Noble lair!” Bligh said, and he spoke for Josette, too.

“If you’re talking about their lair, the same could be said of the entire village,” D said before eyeing the two of them in silence.

Josette shut her eyes. She felt so sad she could die.

“Hey!” Bligh exclaimed, elbowing her and giving her a look of contempt. “You’re a real sucker for pretty boys, ain’t you, lady? I’ve been giving you too much credit!”

“Watch how you talk about me,” she shot back, jabbing him with twice as much force. “And I’ll thank you not to keep calling me *lady*. The name’s Josette, *mister*.”

“Gotcha,” Bligh replied with a hearty nod. This was no time for squabbling. “Anyway, D’s right. Still, I don’t know if I could just go up to a Noble’s castle and —”

“To get outta this village, you gotta learn the Nobles’ secret. Isn’t that why you two went up there?”

Feeling like she was about to lose her mind again, Josette rubbed her temple. It was that damned hoarse voice again.

“It would save a lot of trouble.”



That came from D. Josette felt as if she were listening to some nightmarish comedy skit.

“Okay, let’s do that. That fine by you?”

At Bligh’s question, Josette nodded.

Just then, D turned and looked back.

Bligh strained his eyes.

There were four of them—a quartet of shadowy figures fanned out behind them. Each was tall. They wore sopping wet clothes. Humans—or humanoid, at the very least. However, there was something odd about them, something that couldn’t quite be nailed down.

“You folks from the village?” Bligh said, trying to establish a friendly rapport. “We were staying at a nearby inn. Came here to escape a massive landslide. Where is everybody?”

The four of them advanced suddenly. The sun was still high. Yet they seemed locked in darkness.

The second figure from the left extended his right hand. It was at that instant the others realized what was odd. Dozens of bluish-black tentacles burst from the cuff of the figure’s shirt, sticking to Bligh’s face. Latching onto them with his hands to try and pry them off, Bligh was dragged forward. Out into the rain—into the world of the shadowy figures.

A glint of light pulled the man back.

At that moment, Josette looked at D. The blade he gripped in his right hand was wet. That was all she knew.

A heartbeat later, the tentacles were severed with an explosion of blood the same bluish-black hue, and Bligh first stopped in his tracks, then backed toward his companions. Tentacles rained to the ground from his face.

“OSB?” D asked.

“An OSB/human composite,” the hoarse voice responded. “Goddamned

Sacred Ancestor—it's downright scary how he never tired of this shit."

In the meantime, the shadowy figures had readied for their next attack. All had drawn pistol-like weapons from their belts and had them trained on D. From the way they moved, they'd definitely pulled the triggers. However, there was no muzzle flash, but D kicked off the ground without a sound, his sword flashing out, and four heads sailed up like ripe fruit, bathed in a fountain of their own blood as they rolled across the terrain.

Looking down at the one that stopped by his feet, Bligh cried out and jumped back. He'd been sure it was a human head, but it swiftly decayed, melting away into slime of a hue that was not of this world that was then washed away in the rain.

Neither Bligh nor Josette could speak at first. More than the fear of a new attack by their enemies, it was D's swordsmanship that'd left them dumbstruck. He had beheaded a quartet in the blink of an eye, and while there was a chance the rain had washed it away, there hadn't been so much as a drop of gore on his blade.

Here was someone from a completely different world than theirs.

"Er—" Bligh said, trying to speak to the Hunter, but D had already started walking toward the fortress. The very picture of solitude, he became a shadowy outline—then slid off to one side. No one could've imagined it. The beautiful fiend who'd dispatched four foes in an instant had feebly toppled at length.

"Wh-what the hell happened?"

When the two of them dashed over, a hoarse voice explained, "Nothing. Just got sleepy all of a sudden." Before it had been nothing save unsettling, but now it seemed like a voice from heaven on high. "Lately, we've been working out in the strong light," it continued, "and them flames earlier took a toll, too. The castle's not gonna happen now. Get us into that farmhouse."

Not entirely sure of what was going on, the pair still knew in an instant that those instructions were for the best. With Bligh putting D over his shoulder, and Josette taking the two cyborg horses by the reins, they started walking toward the farmhouse that loomed to their right.

No one was witness to this save the other three heads that still lay in the downpour, giving off white smoke. By the time Bligh, D, and Josette had passed through the farmhouse door, these too had decayed—featureless, eyes melted, ears fallen off. All that remained in the street now of the humanoid quartet were four sets of clothing, leaking the virulent-colored sludge that'd once been their bodies—which the pounding rain quickly dissolved as well.

II

D's violent decline was the result of "sunlight syndrome." A condition exhibited solely by human/Noble half-breeds—dhampirs—it could render them unconscious without warning, and no amount of trying would rouse them. Having no recourse but to wait for him to awaken on his own was a horrifying proposition, and that might take a few seconds or a few years—and in some cases, even a few centuries. It was impossible for any physician to say how long it would take—or for the dhampirs themselves, for that matter.

On hearing this from Josette, Bligh grew pale. Without D, they were afraid to go up to the castle—at some point, they'd become psychologically dependent on the Hunter. Could just the two of them leave D there and go on to the castle? Not a chance.

"Since we don't know when he'll wake up, we can't stay here forever!" Bligh insisted, smacking his fist into the palm of his other hand.

"Excuse me, whoever that other voice is. But where exactly are you?" Josette inquired amiably.

"Let's just keep that a secret. See, we're surrounded by enemies."

"Well, your voice will be enough. Give us some good advice. All our people have vanished, and you can see what's become of our great hope. Plus, the enemy's come at us in daylight—so, what do we do?"

"You gonna do as I tell you?" the hoarse voice said in a strangely confident tone. "If so, I might have a few pearls of wisdom to drop on you."

"Don't go acting so important, you son of a bitch," Bligh snarled, rolling up his sleeves. "Start talking. If you don't, I'll find you for sure and tear you to pieces!"

“Oh, give it a shot, you countrified thug. One look at me and you’ll feel a lot better.”

“See if I don’t!” Bligh shouted, reaching for the survival tool known as an s-device, but Josette stopped him.

“Knock it off. Right now, staying alive is our first priority. We’ll do as you say. What should we do?”

“Oh, leave it to the lovely lady to see the light. First off, lock this place down. Seal up every last door and window. You should find the stuff to do it in the general store.”

“Must’ve had yourself a good look around,” Bligh spat, but the warrior’s wife got to her feet.

“The general store, eh? Let’s get going.”

Their destination had been less than a hundred yards away. The shop was as quiet as everyplace else, and there they found rows of merchandise waiting for them. Hammers and nails were easy enough to locate. As Bligh looked around for anything else they might need, Josette said to him, “You know, those things earlier weren’t really human or Nobility. Think they were OSB, like D said?”

“Yeah, probably. They were crazy strong. And humans or Nobility don’t look as creepy as all that.”

“They were human in shape, though.”

“Maybe that’s the sort of experiments they run in this here village.”

“What do you suppose the Sacred Ancestor wanted to do?”

“I’ll be sure to ask him if I ever run into him,” Bligh replied. “Oh, now this is a find! ‘Scent of Norak’ from the Norak Soap Company. They went out of business more than five hundred years ago, but the stuff’s legendary for how good it was at getting out dirt and the way it smelled after. Who’d have thought we’d find some here. That’s a keeper!”

Ebullient, the man grabbed one bar, then two more, then still more until his hands were so full he dropped one.

“Oops.”

As he squatted down to retrieve the soap, Bligh noticed something. There were the sandal-clad feet of a woman beside him. Straightening up in amazement, he was greeted by Charlotte’s pale visage. It was only natural that he let out a cry of surprise and stood bolt upright. He even blinked his eyes. Still, Charlotte didn’t fade from view.

“Dear me, why so surprised?” Charlotte said with a smile.

His eyes must’ve been playing tricks on him just now, because her color was normal. Bligh looked over at Josette. She wasn’t there. He quickly understood why every hair on his body had risen on end. The door to the back room was hanging wide open. She’d gone off in search of something.

“There’s nothing wrong with me, is there?” Charlotte said with a flirtatious laugh.

“Well, I guess not,” Bligh had to confess. He then asked, “What about everybody else?”

That was the real question.

“They’re fine. They’ll be back soon.”

“Back from where?”

“Somewhere far, far away.”

A smile rose on Charlotte’s lips.

Ah, Bligh thought to himself sadly.

“Say, would you bring me back where you’re staying? I’d like to leave the village with you.”

“Nope,” Bligh replied, shaking his head.

“Why not?” Charlotte asked, taking a step closer and draping a pale arm around his neck. “Why won’t you look at me?”

“Cause your eyes are awful red.”

“Come on. Give me a kiss.”

“No, thanks.”

“Why not?”

“‘Cause your eyeteeth are longer and sharper than before.”

“Oh dear. So, you noticed?” Charlotte laughed. She hid her teeth no longer. “You should be like me. It feels so good!”

Power surged into her arm. Pushing back against it with his left hand, Bligh said, “Sorry about this,” and swung the s-device he’d drawn with his right at her decisively. It struck Charlotte at the base of the neck and sliced her diagonally clear down to the vertebrae.

As Bligh pulled the weapon out again, Charlotte stood there, her lips twisting into a grin.

“That didn’t hurt one little bit.”

“And the others—is everybody like you now?”

“Nope,” she replied languidly, her head swinging from side to side with a seductive look. “They’re different. I’m the only one who ended up like this. Now, give me a kiss.”

“Back!” Bligh exclaimed, brandishing his weapon again, but Charlotte’s hand touched his. Though she only appeared to brush him, Bligh felt frozen down to the bone and couldn’t move.

“Now, then,” Charlotte said, her smile nothing if not bright and cheery as she pressed her lips to the nape of his neck.

Bligh quaked with despair at his fate.

Without warning, the lips came away from him. As the woman pulled back, her face was quickly chiseled with a look of pain and anger, and Charlotte planted both hands on his chest and shoved him back, then turned around. The tip of the short spear that took her through the back and burst from the top of her breast was wet with fresh blood.

“Oh, that’s right,” she said. “There was someone else with you.”

“Right you are.”

As Charlotte turned, Josette pointed the minigun at the woman's chest and gave her a nod.

"There are a ton of things I'd like to ask you. If you'll surrender quietly, I won't do anything to you."

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders. There was a sadness to the gesture.

"Sorry, but it can't be that way."

Bright blood spilled from her mouth. To keep it from getting on her face, Josette raised one hand to block it, and at that instant Charlotte made a powerful kick off the floor. While in midair, her body was torn apart, scattered into countless chunks of bloody flesh. And a number of them left splotches of red on Josette's face.

III

Leaving the scene of the tragedy as it was, the pair returned to the farmhouse. Perhaps sensing the aura of despair that radiated from every inch of them, the hoarse voice met them with the query, "Oh, something happened, eh?"

"Yeah, something—and it went like this."

Once Bligh had related the particulars, he got as his reply, "I see."

Seeing as the hoarse tone wasn't particularly surprised, Bligh had to wonder. "You seem pretty used to all this, don't you?"

"Well, yeah," the hoarse voice laughed. "It's an old story. Only the components have changed."

"What do you mean by that?" Josette asked, and it came as little surprise that her tone had changed. There was the shock of their vanished compatriot returning as a servant of the Nobility, plus the fact that Charlotte had appeared in the daytime.

"Mix a Noble and a human and you get a dhampir, like our friend here," the voice said. By Bligh's estimation, it was coming from the vicinity of the Hunter's left hand. "There are other dhampirs, too. But it's pretty much safe to say none of 'em have this guy's power. So it looks like the Sacred Ancestor's trying to

make a different version of him.”

“Mixing human beings with Nobility?!” Josette cried out incredulously.

“But given there isn’t anyone who’s fueled the rumor mill like this guy, I don’t think *his* efforts have paid off. Maybe he keeps experimenting in vain even now.”

“But the Sacred Ancestor has long since—”

“Yeah, there are a number of rumors he was destroyed. But there’s no proof any of ’em are true. That’s why he’s a legend.”

“Wait a minute. If the Sacred Ancestor’s still alive, how do you explain the Nobility going into this slide for the last three thousand years?” Bligh inquired.

“That’s why I’m not saying he’s alive, either,” the hoarse voice countered. It carried a faint laughter. “Dead or alive? Whatever the case, what you see is probably no more than an illusion of the Sacred Ancestor. Hell, it might be the Nobility’s whole civilization is one, too.”

“You think an illusion’s got us trapped in here, jackass?” Bligh snarled.

“You know, it seems Charlotte said the others hadn’t become vampires yet. We’ve got to hurry up and save them.”

“Zzz . . .”

“Really—are you pretending to be asleep?!” Josette exclaimed.

“Pervy bastard! Hell, you and D are both useless!”

“It’s sunlight syndrome,” said the hoarse voice.

“You little bastard!”

Narrowing his search down to the vicinity of the Hunter’s left hip, Bligh was about to pounce, but nothing lay there but D’s left arm.

“The sun will be going down soon,” Josette said as she watched the dull light fading through a window. “Let’s get down to boarding the place up.”

The farmhouse proved larger than expected, and securing every opening save a window in the living room took more than four hours. Furthermore, they moved what furniture they could—cupboards, dressers, and the like—to block

off every door but the front one, and when their work was finally finished, the two of them plopped down on the floor drenched in sweat and wheezing for breath.

While they'd been working, there'd been a gusty little sound like someone using a fogger coming from D's room, but it ended before either of them even heard it.

"Hey . . . Isn't D . . . up yet?" Bligh called over between breaths.

"Not yet."

"When will he wake up?"

"Don't know. Zzz . . ."

"You little bastard!"

At that point, Josette raised her sweat-streaked face.

"What's wrong?" the man asked.

"Quiet."

Silence descended, but it was immediately shattered.

On her chest, Josette had a gold pendant shaped like a bell out on top of her armor, and it was giving off a ring that was clear, if faint as smoke. Before fortifying the place, Bligh had seen Josette scattering something shiny around the house, coming back, and then scattering some more three times in total.

Could it be they were bells like this? When something touched them, did they make a sound that somehow resonated through the one around Josette's neck as well? No sooner had this rationale occurred to the man than Josette explained, "I scattered the same sort of bells around. If someone touches them, the sound's transmitted to this one."

"Someone like who?"

"I don't know. Just stay on your toes. Charlotte showed up out of nowhere, right? And since they can hear the bells, too, they may stop trying to walk around quietly."

"Great," Bligh grouched, spear in hand as he looked all around.

“Relax,” the hoarse voice called out to them. “While the two of you were nailing things down, I put a shield up inside the house.”

Such words would always be welcome, even in that voice.

“A shield? How’d you manage that?” Bligh inquired.

“Zzz . . .”

“Screw you. At any rate, we don’t have to worry about ’em suddenly popping in through the windows, right?”

“That’s right.”

“That in itself will be a big help,” Josette remarked, her tone one of complete faith in the source of the hoarse voice. In their present situation, she had to believe if she wanted to keep from losing her mind. Faint as it’d been, now they’d lost the rays of sunlight that watched over the world and chased the darkness away. And a long night was beginning. It was the world of the Nobility—a world of evil.

“How many are there?” Bligh asked, his words heavy and clinging.

“One,” Josette replied, closing her eyes and listening intently. “Five yards out . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . Right outside the door now.”

A knock rang out. It wasn’t a thoughtless hammering. Rather, it was the rapping of a considerate guest.

“They’re here,” the hoarse voice said.

Turning her minigun toward the door, Josette asked, “Who is it?”

Though low, her tone burned with fighting spirit. But that determination soon pitched wildly.

“It’s me.”

Amazed, the woman cried out, “Dear?!”

Bligh heard it, too. The voice was that of Lyle Brennan—Josette’s husband. He’d come back. A warrior, tested in the fires of a hundred battles.

“Please, just hear me out,” Brennan continued. “I managed to escape. But they’re after me. Hurry up and let me in.”

Fighting back his own rashness, Bligh looked at Josette. Dark flames burned in her heart. The fire showed in her eyes. As murderous intent.

“We can’t do that, dear. Come back after dawn,” Josette said with determination.

“Don’t give me that bullshit. I’ve got people on my tail. They could kill me at any minute. You’re my wife, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know about anything,” Josette replied, her words gnawed over by fangs of pain.

Bligh came to her aid, saying, “It’s me. Bligh. You hear me, Brennan?”

“Yeah.”

“Hate to say it, but I got attacked by Charlotte. She was a full-on servant of the Nobility. We can’t trust you, either. Answer a question for me.”

“You think I’ve got time for this shit?!”

The door jolted violently.

“If you don’t open the door, I’ll bust it in!”

“Stop it, dear—if you come in, I’ll have to open fire on you!”

“Josette, is that any way to talk to your husband? Forget shooting me, and shoot that jerk!”

Bligh shouted, “What happened to all of you? Where’ve you been all this time, and what’ve you been up to?”

“They’re coming,” Brennan said, his voice quavering. “Open up! Hurry!”

Josette looked at Bligh.

“No can do. He could be lying,” said the man.

“I’m sorry.”

He never would’ve suspected the minigun she held down by her hip would swing around to slam him in the back of the head. Sparks shooting across his eyes, Bligh blacked out.

He quickly regained consciousness.

Josette was by the doorway. The door was half open. She was thrusting the barrel of the minigun at it, trying to dislodge the board she'd shot through.

Bligh got to his feet and was about to dash forward.

"Stooooooooop!"

His tongue failed him. His feet got tangled, too. Pitching forward, he felt a pain from the back of his head, and then it went dark again. When he desperately tried to get up again, Brennan came through the door.

"Over there," Josette said, pointing to a spot, and then she began replacing the board she'd removed. Her right hand held a hammer.

"So, you the one who kept me from getting in here?" Brennan called over to Bligh, still laid out on the floor. The warrior stood there like a wrathful god.

Despite his headache, the man had no trouble reading the hatred in that voice. *This is gonna be ugly*, he thought.

"Save your venting for later. We need every hand we've got."

Even as Brennan listened to Josette, he drew the sword from his back.

"Dear?!"

"This hoodlum thought he could decide whether I lived or died, did he? I won't sit still for that."

The warrior raised his blade.

They heard the whistle a split second before the steel was about to sink into Bligh's chest.

"What's that?"

Swinging his head around with incredible speed, Brennan turned his gaze to the door to the adjacent room. The room where D lay. Like a man pursued by fear he leapt into the next room. And there he saw D lying in bed. He only halted for a moment in the doorway due to the shock of the sleeping Hunter's good looks.

Going over to the bed, the warrior looked down at D, whom he'd never met before, and said, "So, this is him? He's handsome, I'll give him that. Damn, if I

keep looking at him, I'll lose the will to kill. Now, to get rid of him."

Holding his sword up along the right side of his head as if it were a bat, he was just about to bring it down on D's neck when someone said, "Doesn't seem like he's possessed after all." It was a hoarse voice he absolutely wouldn't have thought was the Hunter's, so Brennan bugged his eyes and started looking all around.

"Who's that? Where are you?"

He got an answer.

"Right here."

It was at that moment that D's left arm reached for Brennan.

Swinging the sword was pure reflex for the warrior. The way the hand went flying from the wrist down left him feeling slightly puzzled. His aim had been a little higher than that. The limb flew through the air, struck the door, and fell to the floor.

"There's no blood," Brennan said, squinting his eyes to look at the wrist, but he quickly thought better of it and raised his sword once more.

This time, he was interrupted before he could swing it. Brennan arched backward. A short handmade spear was stuck in his back.

"Knock it off, you son of a bitch! You really did get yourself turned into one of the Nobles' lackeys, didn't you?" Bligh bellowed from the doorway.

For all his shouting, Brennan hadn't been hurt badly.

"No, it's not like that. He made the first move on me."

The warrior reached back and pulled out the spear. A bloody flower swiftly blossomed on his back.

"Get back on your feet and take your medicine. You tried to kill D just now, didn't you?"

"No. He attacked me."

"Shut up and die already!"

Bligh raised a second short spear to strike, but at that moment his ears caught

these words: "It's like the clown says."

"Huh?!"

Poised as he was to hurl his weapon, Bligh was knocked off balance and stumbled forward.

"Dear," Josette said, rushing over, and, on seeing her husband's condition, she gave Bligh a horribly vengeful look. If Brennan hadn't told her just then to stop, she might've opened up with the minigun and reduced Bligh to a thousand bloody chunks.

"You're all making a big mistake. We've already got to the bottom of this misunderstanding. Focus on what's outside," the hoarse voice said.

"I didn't see anything," said the woman.

"No, they're coming after me."

Josette was about to refute that when her ears caught a dull impact that sent vibrations through every inch of her.

The OSB Era

chapter 4

I

They're here!" Brennan told them in what was almost a groan, but Bligh still eyed him distrustfully.

"You sure this bastard ain't one of Nobles' lackeys?"

"I guarantee it. And my word is D's word," said the hoarse voice.

"D?" Brennan made a puzzled face. As if he'd suddenly suffered amnesia, he murmured, "D? Did you say 'D'? As in *that* D?"

"Yes—*that* D," Josette reassured him.

"I—I just tried—to kill D . . ."

The house shook. And then it was rocked again. And while it wasn't on account of those tremors, Brennan got weak kneed and slumped to the floor all the same.

Turning to face the front door, Josette said, "I wonder if that's the price for forgetting your place—anyway, hang in there. I'll be right back!" And then the woman dashed off.

Bloodied short spear in hand, Bligh followed after her.

As they charged into the front hall there was a crash, and off to their right an east-facing window shattered, giving a glimpse of a black hand between the boards that'd been hammered over it.

“Get lost, asshole!” Bligh shouted, hurling the short spear from ten feet away. Its wrist bones shattered, the hand pulled out again.

Josette was aiming at the front door.

Just as he picked up the fallen short spear, Bligh heard the sound of breaking glass from a western window and turned to look. A different hand appeared, breaking its way through the boards. It was black, too.

“Son of a bitch!”

Charging over, Bligh jabbed out with his weapon. He slipped past the side of the hand, taking aim at the intruder’s face. It made contact. A low voice rang out, and the hand pulled back.

“How’s it going over there? There’s just no end to this shit!”

“The door can’t take much more of this. Look at it.”

“All right,” Bligh said, gripping his short spear as if it were his last friend in the world.

Brennan managed to get to his feet, then lay down on the sofa, groaning, “Shit, I can’t stop the bleeding. That goddamned thug.”

“It’s a freaking scratch. Lie on your stomach and get a load of the face.”

Though Brennan searched for the source of the hoarse voice, he found neither hide nor hair of it.

“D’s face—look at it!”

Feeling that he couldn’t fight that command, the warrior complied. The instant that gorgeous visage entered his field of view, the hardened combatant forgot the piercing pain. He learned then for the very first time that beauty could strip away all sensation and emotion. He didn’t even notice that something cold had been applied to his back. Nor that the pain there had vanished.

“I know you’re not a servant of the Nobility,” the hoarse voice whispered in Brennan’s ear. “But that poses a new mystery. How come you’re still okay?”

“That was the deal we had. I’d stay human. And they’d leave my wife alone, too. In return, I was told to kill the man who’d come here today.”

“Hmm, so they knew he was a formidable foe? You’d better forget about assassinating D. Or he might end up having to get rid of you and your wife both.”

The hoarse voice harbored a certain intent. It robbed Brennan of his voice.

“Now, would you care to tell me more about who ‘they’ are?”

The warrior shook his head vehemently. “Can’t do that. If I talk, they’ll kill me for sure. That was the deal.”

“Hmph,” was all the hoarse voice said, but apparently it’d seen in an instant that the man wasn’t lying. It continued, “Well, we’ll just have to see what you do, then. I’m not gonna tell you to keep away from D, but you’d better not try anything funny. I have eyes everywhere!”

And the second it finished saying that, there was a maddening explosion of pain from the wound on Brennan’s back, and he passed out.

“That should be enough of a threat,” said the hoarse voice. “And now—”

There were indications of something turning toward the front hall, and then the sound of a brisk burst of fire whistled that way like a wind.

The front door fell inward—or was about to, but at that moment Josette unleashed a fusillade. The thick oak door was reduced to splinters sailing through the air. Two bursts of fire had sufficed.

Letting the power out of the finger on the firing button, Josette shook her head to throw off some of the tension.

A pair of black figures leapt in. Though she blew the upper body of the one on the right to pieces, the one on the left stayed low and kicked off the floor, bounding right for Josette’s heart. She slammed the barrel of her gun into the attacker’s face. Though it fell to the floor without saying a word, it immediately got up again. That was more than enough time for the woman to take aim.

Marked by the line of fire ripping up the floor, it was cut in two at the waist. The lower half bounded for Bligh where he fought by the window, and the

upper half pounced on Josette's chest, wringing her neck with furious strength. A metallic sound assailed her eardrums, and darkness closed over her field of view. The diagonal thrust of the minigun she'd had down by her waist took the last of her strength. The instant it struck, she fired without regard for anything else.

Suddenly the grip on the woman's throat weakened, and something warm splattered her face and upper body. The light returned.

Coughing violently all the while, Josette looked over at Bligh. She thought she must be dreaming. Bligh was trying his best to block kicks from the severed lower body. Both his short spears lay on the floor. No doubt they'd been kicked out of his hands.

"Get back!" Josette shouted, and once she'd seen him spring away, she unleashed a burst of fire.

"Think you could make a little less mess with that thing?" Bligh said, turning a blood-spattered face toward her as he slumped back against the wall.

"We're about even there," she spat. Having been sprayed with gore from the upper half of their foe, Josette was every bit as dirty as Bligh.

For a while, neither of them moved. They realized the enemy had gone.

"Did we fight 'em off? You did pretty good for a woman."

"You didn't do half bad yourself, for a man."

The exchange of ribbing between horribly gore-soaked compatriots was an unsettling sight.

"Think they'll be back?"

Josette shook her head from side to side. Her golden hair swayed like something from a dream. Oddly enough, that alone had been spared so much as a drop of blood. "But let's make preparations in case they do."

The eyes of the pair fell on the hammer and the boards that'd been torn free.

Once their carpentry work was done, they decided that would have to be

good enough, and Josette headed for the bath. Bligh, for his part, went into the kitchen and turned the faucet at the sink. He had his doubts, but water came out. It wasn't even rusty. Washing his face, he stripped off his shirt and used a rag next to the sink to wipe down his upper body, at which point he finally felt like himself again.

No longer feeling the need for a bath, he headed toward D's room. On seeing Brennan sleeping peacefully on the sofa, he was rather surprised. He'd figured the man had long since expired.

Why the hell's he still alive?"

"I treated him," said the hoarse voice that drifted through the room.

Look as he might, Bligh couldn't tell where it came from.

"Well, you shouldn't have. He's the enemy!"

"And I told you you're wrong about that. Looks like the attack's over, eh? As soon as it's daybreak, I'm going up to the castle to talk things over."

"Talk things over? Hey, where are you, anyway?"

"Don't you worry about me. I'm a messenger of the gods."

"The hell you say! You're useless. Do something about that stud over there."

"That and everything else will have to wait until daybreak. You and the lady better keep watch and make sure nobody else comes to attack us."

After Bligh left indignantly, Josette, who seemed like she might've been listening in, came in with a wry grin. Apparently she'd washed off her armor, and now beads of water clung to it instead of a film of blood and guts.

"I'll head out there in a moment," she said flatly before asking, "Will my man be okay?"

"He got treatment pretty soon, so he should pull through. Seems he somehow managed to escape. See if you can get more details out of him yourself later."

"I'll do that. I wonder what's become of the others."

"Seems he isn't talking about that."

Going over to her husband and gazing down at him intently as he took deep,

stable breaths, Josette said, “He’s tough in battle, but he breaks pretty easily on other fronts.” Her words sounded as if she were peering down into the depths of the water. “Lately, those he killed in battle seem to haunt his dreams, so he hasn’t been sleeping well at all. He’s probably better off now. He can just forget everything and sleep. Or perhaps—”

“Perhaps what?” the hoarse voice inquired.

Josette just gave a little shake of her head and said, “It’ll be quite some time before we can leave the village, right? I need him to stay well that long. If you’re the one who patched him up, then I’d appreciate you helping with his recovery, too.”

Bowing her head, she left the room.

After a short time, in this room where light and dark intermingled, a voice said, “We’d probably be better off if we could sleep until the end of time. And so would this warrior.” Turning toward D, the presence continued, “And this man most of all.”

His tone was strangely tranquil. Perhaps that was just the sort of mood he was in. However, the voice soon headed for the doorway.

“How’d you get in here?”

The question was directed at a tall figure standing there in lavish attire. He stood taller than D. Six and a half feet at the very least. His shoulders and chest were scaled in the same daunting proportions. The deep blue fabric of his cape had Gothic patterns embroidered in gold thread, and though he wore no jacket, he had on a gold double-breasted vest with jeweled buttons—diamonds, no doubt. The long gloves that went all the way up to his elbows were also embroidered in gold. And yet, the mood he cast in all directions felt mysteriously profound due to his inborn grace. His eyes, nose, lips, the contours of his face—all were, in a word, elegant. Yet for all that, he was cheery—by human standards, he gave the impression of being a resolute and generous man, and certainly no villain.



Gripping a very long spear, his right hand rose, pointing the head of it—which was still sheathed in a vermillion cover—at the sleeping Hunter.

“I would have your name.”

“Feel free to introduce yourself first,” the hoarse voice replied.

“I am Lord Greylancer.”

The air rocked with indications of surprise.

“I know you. But it can’t be . . . I mean, it’s an honor to meet you.”

“The honor is mine.”

This man who spoke of being honored to the hoarse voice that accompanied D was a Noble who appeared to be in his midtwenties, and, having said that, he gave a smile that was equally elegant.

II

“To the man known as Lord Greylancer, my shields wouldn’t count for shit. Are you here to take D’s life?”

“Ah, it is he, then?!” Greylancer said, and now it was his turn to widen his eyes. There could be no doubting it was deep emotion that swayed his towering form. “When I saw the sensor readings, I judged it could not be this man, yet his dignity, his beauty—verily, he is the one called D.” Greylancer backed away. “My guess would be this is ‘sunlight syndrome.’ I believe I shall settle with him once he awakens. Kindly give him my regards.”

“Wait—you’re supposed to be . . .”

Disregarding the hoarse voice, the shadowy figure departed. Though the lights were on, he headed off into the darkness framed by the doorway.

“You fought the OSB three millennia ago, slew any Nobles in opposition—and you were supposedly destroyed,” the hoarse voice murmured.

For the Nobility, there was no “death.” They could merely be destroyed. And only those who were certain to shine even at the very moment of their destruction were called “Lord” by the Nobility.

“Lord Greylancer.”

Something rested on D’s chest. His severed left arm.

“D will probably regret for the rest of his days that he wasn’t awake to meet him on his first visit.” Then, the left hand added, “Oh, I remember the sound of the rain. As if it were to fall forever, in darkness and in light. Is that where a man deserving of the title Nobility returns?”

The next day the rain didn’t abate, and the houses looming beneath the leaden sky and the people were all reduced to vague shadows. Shrouded in a white spray of rain as he rode through it on a cyborg horse, a figure climbed the sloping road to the fortress.

On reaching the summit, the rider remained facing straight ahead but said, “We’re there.” It was Bligh.

“Okay, head back,” the hoarse voice replied in the epitome of ingratitude, and something somewhere seemed to move away from the horse. Indeed, there was a sound like something wet had struck the road.

However, by the look of Bligh, he apparently didn’t spot anything. Quickly tugging on the reins to wheel his steed around, he made his way back down the road without a backward glance.

“Good job, scaredy-cat,” the hoarse voice said from somewhere down on the rain-beaten ground, and there was a sound as if some small object were gliding like the wind across the brick-paved road, bound straight for the main gate to the fortress.

“What’s this?” the left hand blurted out.

At the main entrance to the fortress—the same one Bligh and Josette had used to get in—it had spotted four figures.

What are they up to? it thought without drawing any nearer, but the quartet sent up splashes as they drew closer.

“Lord Greylancer has sent us. Please, come this way. If you would be so kind

as to come out of there.”

In addition to the aged steward in a tuxedo that hardly seemed to suit the rugged fortress, there were three younger stewards. They held elegant umbrellas. The aged steward was addressing the trunk of an enormous tree planted by the ramparts.

“You’re not gonna get rough with me, are you?” a voice inquired suspiciously from behind the tree trunk. The hoarse voice.

“Don’t be absurd. Were we to do any such thing, our master would erase us from existence.”

“Okay, then. I’m gonna trust you.”

“Thank you,” the steward said, bowing his head respectfully, and the source of the voice appeared sheepishly at his feet.

Had ever a single hand blended hardness and elegance so perfectly? It was a left hand that’d been severed cleanly above the wrist. There wasn’t a trace of scorn, or suspicion, or surprise—nor was there any hesitation to hold out their umbrellas for it, and the four stewards surrounded their guest on all sides almost protectively and began to walk toward the front entrance with a gait that suggested they were ascending to the heavens themselves.

As soon as they set foot inside, they were greeted by rows of women in maid uniforms on either side. There was no way they’d be human. They had to be synthetic people or illusions.

“Nothing but cuties here, eh? They don’t really fit with a castle like this, you know.”

“The one we serve is, in a manner of speaking, coarse.”

“What, Lord Greylancer?” the hoarse voice murmured nonchalantly.

“No.”

“Not him?”

That was a surprise. A man like him was sure to have a domain and a castle of his own. Was he a visitor, then? No, in light of the reason the village had been created, someone of his station wouldn’t be staying here.

As the left hand was bewildered, the aged steward asked it, “Which would you prefer, the elevator or the stairs?”

“What are we talking, time-wise?”

“The elevator takes precisely ten seconds, and the stairs approximately two hours.”

“Elevator it is.”

“Very good, sir.”

The steward was speaking in all sincerity, their conversation rooted in the Nobility’s “nostalgic tastes.”

Although the Nobility had undoubtedly reached the highest pinnacle of scientific inquiry in the planet’s history—and used that to fight on equal footing with the OSB—they were slaves to an almost unfathomable love of antiquity. While they’d developed spaceships that could travel at light speed, the craft that crossed the Earth’s skies were enormous dirigibles sporting countless propellers, or single-seater flying machines with gasoline-driven engines operated by pedals. Though the continents were linked by gravity-powered roads that could propel cars sixty thousand miles per second, the Nobility’s favorite mode of transport were opulent carriages like those in days of old drawn by living horses. Nobles headed toward the moon were first greeted with the question, “Shall it be the Lightspeed Express, or Traditional Rocket?”

So, the left hand had chosen the elevator.

They arrived in ten seconds, on the dot. They were five thousand stories below the surface—thirty miles underground. With stewards young and old to either side of it, the left hand went down the transparent corridor, while scenes that were a compromise between super-scientific civilization and nostalgic tastes appeared and disappeared, one after another.

An assemblage of enormous stone gears seemed to go on forever, each gear three-quarters of a mile in diameter and every tooth on them as large as a house, so it seemed it wouldn’t have been strange for them to have a window from which residents might peer. Antigravity aircraft that were the pinnacle of aerodynamics were clustered there to repair a cracked gear. A portion of the

energy they emitted became a crimson lotus blossom of flame, with more welling up from down below, threatening to broil the strange group of pedestrians.

“How far down does it go?” asked the left hand.

“More than four thousand miles.”

“Nearly to the outer core, eh? What’s the big idea of making a facility in a place like this? Granted, they’re cursed to live in a world without light anyway.”

The aged steward turned right. Straight ahead, a thirty-foot-tall iron door covered with rivets came into view. Their surroundings remained the same, but the way the door opened to the sound of creaking hinges was jarring to an almost supernatural degree.

Suddenly, the scenery that’d surrounded them was gone. A vast chamber greeted the visitors. The left hand crept across the white floor, where bizarre devices loomed to either side. No engineer could’ve guessed their function from their appearance, but every time one of the stewards was about to bump into one of the devices it would reposition itself or, on occasion, change its shape. Up high off to the left were rows of what looked to be wooden coffins, stretching as far as the eye could see and seemingly numbering in the tens of thousands. From the gaps between coffins and lids that were ajar, pale hands wormed and pale faces peeked. All had eyes that were burning red.

There was no saying which direction they traveled or how much ground they’d covered.

About ten yards up ahead, a pair of figures stood. On the right was a lovely woman in a white dress, and on the left was Lord Greylander with spear in hand.

The aged steward halted about ten feet shy of the pair and bowed his head, and, once both of them gave him a nod, they then respectfully greeted the left hand down on the floor.

It was most unusual that these dignified Nobles had salutations for a hand creeping across the ground.

The beautiful woman opened her mouth, saying, “My name is Duchess

Heldarling. I serve the Noble Medical Association as its highest ranking member. His Lordship has told me about you. You're a part of the man they call D, are you not?"

"Yes, your grace," the left hand replied in a dignified manner. Though nothing existed of this being from the wrist up, it possessed a certain grace.

"In that case, we shall welcome you as we would D. It is on that account you've been permitted to pass this far."

"What are you folks doing here?" the left hand inquired.

"This," the duchess replied, eyes gleaming.

A stark naked woman floated up from the floor. She was followed by a creature that was clearly not of this world. It looked to be composed of tens of thousands of bluish-black strands or worms. Although it possessed a head, neck, torso, and four limbs, each of those parts looked weak and undependable because of their composition, as if even the normal force of Earth's gravity would be enough to flatten it so badly it might be reduced to two dimensions. And deep within that amalgamation of strands, packed so tightly there was no space between them, red eyes were visible. Those eyes might have held all the justification the Nobility needed for waging war against their kind.

"Is that an OSB?" the left hand asked, standing bolt upright on the floor. A tiny human face complete with eyes and a nose had risen on its surface.

It was Lord Greylancer who replied, "Yes, it is."

III

A disturbing air of danger pervaded the house. It was generated by the three humans and single dhampir that currently occupied the building.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Brennan asked, repeating a query he'd made a dozen times before. "I'm human. D even vouched for me!"

"Are you an idiot or something? How's someone with a face like that supposed to have a voice like a dying old frog? Whoever it is, it ain't got nothing to do with D."

This reply came from Bligh, naturally.

“I’m still human. The fact that I can move around in daylight and work with the rest of you is proof of that.”

“That thing D cut down was out there walking around, too, and all but humming a tune!”

“That thing was a monster. You’ve gotta see that, don’t you? Isn’t that right, Josette?”

“Yeah. I believe you.”

“Oh wow, now that’s the kind of love between a man and his wife that brings a tear to my eye,” Bligh said in a tone that would convince anyone he was obstinate. “But that don’t count for a damn thing. Does the love between a couple let a woman know if her hubby’s a servant of the Nobility? You can say, ‘I believe you,’ till you’re blue in the face, but if he puts the bite on you later, that’ll be the end of that.”

“You son of a bitch!” Brennan growled, reaching for the longsword on his back, but Bligh leapt out of range of the blade and stood with a short spear at the ready.

“Stop it!” Josette cried, her minigun quivering violently as she tried to decide which of them to point it toward. For the warrior woman was equally befuddled.

Brennan was put at a disadvantage by his inability to tell her the truth of what had happened while he was missing or how he’d managed to escape. He’d explained the situation. Though Josette seemed to accept it, Bligh took him for a liar from the very start and would hear none of it. Josette probably didn’t trust him entirely, either, so her attitude had inevitably hardened.

However, where attacks from outside were concerned, Brennan remained completely calm, saying, “They promised that as long as I was here, they wouldn’t raise a hand against you.”

Yeah, Bligh would say, but what about last night?

They hadn’t broken off their offensive. Brennan had to have been part of an undercover operation to slay D. That much was true, and Brennan didn’t protest very strongly, he just grew agitated and went outside. Interpersonal

relations were growing increasingly strained. But even given that discord and the fact that rain continued to come down in buckets, once the sun came up, the world was full of light. The minds of all three couldn't help steeping in relief and relaxation as if they were in a tepid bath.

"I wonder how the others are," Josette finally said.

"They'll be back safe and sound soon, just like me. Stop harping on me about it."

"That's not what I—"

Oh, a domestic spat! This oughta be good, Bligh thought, feeling the tension slack around his lips.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked his eardrums.

That's not gunpowder. What, then? the three of them suddenly wondered.

"It's outside!"

They raced over to the western windows and peeked out. There was a row of farmhouses on that side.

First, Bligh focused on the scene. "The last one in the row ain't there," he said.

"Huh?" husband and wife asked in unison.

"It's gone, clean as a whistle. Not a damn trace. No fire, no smoke pouring out. It sure wasn't gunpowder they used. Come to think of it, since D's asleep, all they'd have to do is blow us to smithereens. The bastards have upped the stakes. That was a threat!"

"If they just have to blow us to smithereens, they wouldn't need to threaten us," Brennan countered. "In that case, they wouldn't bother with any needless destruction. They'd just come straight here. Something's strange about this. Get ready to pull out."

"What about D?"

"Leave him." Brennan didn't say the rest: *If we do that, they won't have a problem with us.*

"But . . ."

“I’ll carry him,” Bligh said, looking back at them.

“He’ll just slow us down.”

“Shut your trap, hired gun. I got saved myself once already. I’ll be damned if I won’t even the score.”

“Do what you like, then, weirdo.”

“Someone’s coming!” Josette shouted, looking out the window.

A stark figure was coming from the direction of the vanished house with a wobbly, uncertain gait. Apparently, his clothes were white—that was all they could tell. On reaching the house next to theirs, he didn’t seem to do anything, yet there was the same explosive sound as before, and that farmhouse, too, vanished. It exploded from the inside out—or so it appeared, but it was utterly reduced to a dustlike substance.

“What the hell was that? The whole house just vanished!”

Bligh’s cry prompted Brennan to say in a badly frayed tone, “What is he, some kind of walking bulldozer? I hear a dozer went out of control and beat the hell out of an entire village in the eastern Frontier.”

“It’d be more accurate to say it *crushed* the hell out of the place,” Josette interrupted. “But he just made it disappear, without lifting a finger. It’s completely different. Even if we leave, I’m not sure we could get away from him . . .”

“I’ll be damned if I’ll go out quietly,” Bligh snarled, baring his teeth. He didn’t lack fighting spirit. “Hey, lady. Give that thing a blast with your peashooter. Maybe you can punch his ticket.”

“Roger that.”

“You’re out of your mind. And you—what are you trying to get my wife to do? We’re falling back! Josette, get ready to move out.”

“Okay.”

“Hey, just a minute. You gotta do everything hubby says?! I thought I’d run across a woman of quality for a change, so don’t go disappointing me. You sure the two of you ain’t out to get D?”

“Shut up. Let’s go!”

Dragging the baggage behind him, Brennan headed for the back door. The cyborg horses were tethered out there.

Putting her saddlebags over her shoulder, Josette looked at Bligh and told him, “You’d better pull out, too.”

“That’s what I had in mind, but now I’ve reconsidered. The village’s too small to run far. They’ll find us right away. On top of that, there’s something strange about that character just now. Hurry up and go. Your hubby’s gonna blow his top.”

As the woman gave him a mournful look and lowered her head, Bligh gave her a light clap on the shoulder and told her, “Staying alive’s the most important thing. Your hubby’s right. Get going already.”

Pressing her lips closed tight, Josette stared back at the rough man. It wasn’t the kind of look you gave a stranger. Not saying a word, the warrior woman turned and vanished through the doorway.

With a weary expression flitting across his face for just a heartbeat, Bligh reached for the weapon through the back of his belt, then tightened his grip on the short spear.

“But now that I’m on my own, I do feel kinda helpless. Hey, say something.”

He was talking to D.

There was another bang. The color swiftly drained from the man, who got a desperate look on his face and mustered his strength.

“We’re gonna be in real trouble soon, I think. But I’ll be damned if I’ll stay cowering here so we get taken out with the whole house. I’ll take the fight outside. You stay here, okay?” he said, looking down at D, but then he suddenly thought of something.

“That might just be our chance. My head’s still good for something after all.”

Taking a knee on the floor by D, Bligh raised his right hand.

“Namu Amida, amen, grazie—wake up, D!”

There was a thud against D's chest. Once more raising the fist he'd hammered against the Hunter, Bligh swung it down again. He repeated the brutal CPR nearly a dozen times.

D didn't move a muscle.

"Shit, was that too much to ask? Well, this time it's really goodbye. Godspeed till your left hand gets back, stud."

And leaving the Hunter with that, Bligh headed for the front hall.

"What the hell?!"

The *thing* was out in front of the house—standing not ten feet away.

"You're a little early," he said to the opponent who bared his teeth, someone garbed in white, top and bottom. While not as gorgeous as D, he was still stunningly handsome. The only thing that kept Bligh from losing himself in that beauty was the fact he'd been looking at D all this time.

"I'm the one you want. Okay, come at me," the man blustered out in the downpour, brimming with fight, but it didn't seem he had a chance in the world of winning. Rain streamed into his eyes, bringing with it his already-soaked hair.

This couldn't get any worse, Bligh thought, and he wanted to cry.

"It would seem the Sacred Ancestor saw some possibilities in the OSB."

Duchess Heldarling put her hand on the OSB's left arm and wrenched it off with the monstrous strength of the Nobility. Blood the same hue as its skin spouted wildly, soaking the floor. The duchess raised the limb high, catching what dripped from it in her mouth—ostensibly, blood—before shuddering in a way most unbecoming a Noble and spitting it out again.

"I never tasted it before, but the rumors are true. Sulfuric acid or molten lava would be preferable to this. However, it carries within it all of the civilization that allowed them to cross the untold vastness of space and attack this world. Both the Sacred Ancestor and I thought so. We believed that mixing their blood with that of the Nobility could give birth to new possibilities. The Sacred Ancestor built this experimental facility from scratch while 'The Great Battle'

yet raged. No small number of test subjects were produced. Most were gravely wounded patients. Perhaps it was on account of that, but all of the results were lacking. And so, about a millennium after the conclusion of the OSB hostilities, this facility was abandoned.”

“So, why’s it back up, then?” the left hand asked, getting right to the heart of the matter.

“Yesterday, one of the humans we later abducted—a woman—was bleeding. Her blood permeated the ground, where the core sensors took note of it. How great is the power of the Sacred Ancestor! A few drops of blood were enough to revive this facility. And myself, and our sturdy friend.”

The duchess shot a quick look back at Greylancer, an ironic grin rising on her lips that he wouldn’t see from that angle.

“Hmm, I see,” the left hand replied. It continued, “To be frank, you’re making trouble for folks up there. What’d you plan on doing?”

“Since the facility is back, there’s naught to do save work until I accomplish the task for which it was created. It was toward that end that I captured them.”

Though the duchess didn’t move, four humans appeared to her right stuck in semitranslucent material that seemed to serve as containers—Jan, Emily, Beth, and Arbuckle.

“They still alive?”

“We wouldn’t kill them without cause,” Lord Greylancer replied.

“Indeed. At the moment, they are being examined. As advanced as our medical knowledge is, even now there are things about human beings we don’t understand.”

The duchess made an easy wave of her right hand. The four captives vanished from sight.

“Don’t intend on letting ’em go, do you?” the left hand inquired.

“They are vital experimental subjects. However, I might consider exchanging them for D.”

“Oh-ho, you wanna use him in your experiments, too?” the left hand

exclaimed in surprise. That was followed by a chuckle. "You think we'd go for that deal?"

It was Greylancer who answered, saying, "I'll see that you do. We desire D most urgently, so that we might fulfill the aims of this facility."

"At the start, you tried using Brennan to nail D. Change your plans?"

This time it was the duchess who replied. "I still intend to kill him. It was only Lord Greylancer's proposal that stayed my hand."

"Why experiment on D?" the left hand asked, its words directed at the tall man.

A strange tension and cries short of actual words rained down from the air.

Changing its position, the left hand turned its palm in that direction. A tiny face arose on its surface.

Those who stood in midair staring in the hand's direction had to have numbered at least ten thousand strong. All of them were misshapen.

The Sacred Ancestor's Plan

chapter 5

I

This was the Sacred Ancestor's plan?" the left hand inquired, not sounding the least bit surprised.

"As I thought—you knew of it, didn't you?" Greylancer said, a thin smile on his lips. "Though I recall hearing fragmented legends of D and his partner, I never imagined I would find myself in their presence here and now—and I should truly thank my stars."

The left hand's manner suddenly grew easy. It had sensed the truth in the giant's words. What billowed from him was a limitlessly deep sense of *nobility*.

However, the duchess spoke of how this facility had awakened from a long sleep. One that Greylancer had undoubtedly shared. How did a man who'd lived three millennia ago know about D and his left hand?

"Well, don't expect *him* to be impressed when he wakes up," the left hand said.

"I understand that. And that is the way the D I know must remain. It is precisely because he is such a man that I wish him to be brought here."

"With all the systems you've got here, why take such a sneaky approach? It'd be a piece of cake for you to grab him, house and all."

"This gentleman desires that D come of his own volition. He says he doesn't wish to force him. I don't really understand it," the duchess said with a touch of

sarcasm.

“Is that a fact?” the left hand replied in a powerful tone. “In that case, you’d best give up and set the lot of us free—meaning, let us out of the village.”

“And would that be the end of it?” the duchess inquired.

“Huh?”

“We took hostile actions toward D. If we set you free and asked him to forget it ever happened—do you think him the sort to forgive and forget?”

“Nope. He wouldn’t leave here until he’d smashed all your systems and put an end to every last one of you.”

“Then we, too, must take steps to respond. It is for that very reason that Lord Greylancer was summoned.”

“Summoned—oh,” the hoarse voice said, but whether that was from admiration or understanding was unclear.

“And there you have it,” the giant said with a nod. There was a strange gleam in his eye. It wasn’t merely the will to fight, now that it was clear he’d been called here to do battle with D. There was the sense like a boulder that could tip over at the next gust of wind—a feeling of desolation.

The left hand sounded exhausted as it said, “You know, coming here might be for the best for him, too. But there’s nothing I can do at this point. He’ll put all of you to death—that’s all I know.”

“If so—then we really have no choice but to dispose of him?” the duchess said, an air of menace beginning to pervade her surroundings. Looking down at the left hand, she said, “You should see this. Watch D do battle with the berserker we sent after him.”

“You’re not going to use the warrior you’ve got right here?”

“I believe this one to be more vicious, cunning, and a superior fighter—”

Suddenly, the duchess’s upper body doubled backward.

“Wh-wh-what?!”

To the accompaniment of the left hand’s cries, the blood-hued tip of a spear

appeared from the Noblewoman's chest. Fresh blood sprayed across the floor. Apparently not even the left hand had imagined the duchess would be hefted ten feet into the air.

"Oh dear!" the left hand exclaimed, but even though it backed away, both the back of it and its fingers were mercilessly drenched by blood splashing off the floor.

"Do you understand why it's come to this, Duchess Heldarling?" Greylancer said, now with a completely different eldritch aura bedecking him like invisible flames.

"You'll regret this . . . Greylancer . . ."

"It's *Lord* Greylancer. I care not whether you call me Grey or Lancer, but forgetting the Lord is unpardonable. Furthermore, there's your offense of having dispatched a warrior without consulting me."

"You'll regret this . . . Lord . . . Greylancer."

"And you have no time to waste on regrets. How does it feel to be destroyed the day after rising again?"

"Stop this. Let me down."

"You were going to go on to say how you believe your warrior surpassed me, Duchess? That assumes me to be the loser. Tell me now whether or not your assessment was correct."

"I was mistaken. Please forgive me."

"Fine."

An instant later, the duchess's body sailed through the air like a small ball, slamming into the corridor wall and bouncing off it again. She'd flown over fifty yards. The sound of her impact had been distinctly mixed with that of breaking bones.

Showing not the slightest concern, as if he'd just disposed of a piece of trash, Greylancer raised his right hand into the air. A number of the village's farmhouses appeared in midair. It was an aerial view of the area surrounding the house D and the others had holed up in.

Greylancer squinted. A figure dressed in casual white garments, top and bottom, stood in front of a farmhouse two down from the one D was in. And in the twinkling of an eye, the house before him vanished without a sound.

“Oh, is that the berserker who surpasses me, Duchess?”

“Yes,” came the reply from just behind him, and it wasn’t tinged with the slightest bit of pain. “He is called ‘U-taker of the Twilight.’”

Greylancer turned his head a bit and looked at the duchess. There wasn’t so much as a drop of blood on her raiment. Apparently that came as no surprise, and he gave her an amused look as he asked, “What is he?”

When he charged the guy, Bligh knew he was probably as good as dead. But a faint hope of taking the other guy with him skimmed through his brain. So when he stabbed the foe deep in the heart without meeting any resistance, the man couldn’t believe it.

The world was filled with stark light, and a roar spread like ripples across water. It was lightning.

The enemy didn’t even look at the spear. Nor was he looking at Bligh. What he stared at was up ahead and off to the right—the very farmhouse Bligh had come from.

“Huh?”

Even knowing the danger it exposed him to, Bligh turned and looked. It was perfectly clear that the foe before him considered him less than an insect.

A tall figure was standing in front of the door. Lightning flashed again, starkly illuminating every detail of handsome features colored by darkness.

The enemy’s mouth moved slowly, like it was a lump of iron. “What are you?” he asked robotically.

“He is a hellspawn, the result of experiments a millennium after your destruction. His skill in combat is among the top five of the Nobility, a thousand times more violent than any Noble and always thirsty for blood. Not only that,

but he is a demon hell-bent on destroying all of creation. On noticing his true nature, I immediately decided to terminate him, but the Sacred Ancestor stopped me,” the duchess explained.

“Why?” asked Greylancer.

“Even now, the reasons are shrouded in a fog. When U-taker ran amok, the Sacred Ancestor personally captured him, draining all the blood from his body and imprisoning him in a high-gravity cell.”

“Oh, he’s quite a threat, then. If he’s among the top five Nobility, then I see how he might surpass me.”

There was silence from the duchess.

“Well, then, I’m off to dispose of him.”

“Lord Greylancer, your role here—”

“—is to fight D. But at this rate, that house will be destroyed, and D with it. Perhaps that’s merely fate, but there’s a voice inside me telling me not to accept it. And I cannot ignore its call. Making you pay for disregarding my wishes shall have to wait until later.”

The gigantic figure began to walk away.

Just then—the tiny world hanging in midair was bleached white.

Three cries were heard.

“D?! ”

Out in the torrential downpour, D slowly opened the gate and stepped into the street. As he was doing so, Bligh and the man in white—U-taker—saw thousands of Ds. His image was reflected in every flying drop of rain. In the light-deprived world of gray, they glistened like jewels.

U-taker’s brain couldn’t be said to be functioning normally. When he’d imprisoned the berserker in the high-gravity cell, the Sacred Ancestor had robbed him of his memory—and this was one of the side effects.

Nevertheless, his evil nature and intent were alive and well. The first two

houses had been destroyed to intimidate his prey. The blow from the short spear had gone uncountered for the same reason. But now he quivered madly from head to toe, as if the storm clouds of an unspeakable tempest of emotions were welling up in him. Fear and exaltation.

His brain focused on a single question. Just who or what was this gorgeous man before him?

“I am . . . U-taker . . . I wish . . . to know . . . your name,” he said robotically.

“D.”

U-taker said nothing, but a tiny ripple of memory rolled across his face. His narrow eyes began to fill with an intense light.

“That is a name . . . I’ve heard . . . only once before . . .” He trembled again from head to toe. And he was painfully aware of the emotions he felt. Hate and rage.

A hard metallic *ching!* rose through the sound of the rain.

U-taker raised his right hand. Was this the power the Sacred Ancestor had locked away?

Suddenly, U-taker pressed his right hand to the base of his neck. The fresh blood that seeped out from between his fingers looked shockingly vivid in that ash gray world.

“When . . . did you . . . cut me?” U-taker asked, backing away.

“Before you raised your right hand.”

“But . . . it didn’t do any damage . . . D . . .”

His right hand rose again.

That fearsome force erased all the houses and trees along an invisible line and opened a massive hole in the side of the distant hill. However, before Bligh could even notice that, his eyes were drawn to U-taker’s right hand, severed at the wrist and flying through the air with a ribbon of red behind it.

His whole body covered in crimson, U-taker thudded to the ground and moved no more. The rain bounced off his body.

Using his right hand to return his blade to its scabbard, D gazed quietly at Bligh.

The recipient of that gaze started to quake.

“Um . . . that . . . monster . . . I mean, when did you . . . cut him down? When . . . and how? Just who . . . or what . . . are you?” Bligh asked, almost feeling as if somebody else were making him speak.

D’s eyes shifted to the stump where he’d lost his left hand.

“If you’re wondering about th-that thing . . . it went up to the castle. Yeah, it said it wanted to talk to the folks inside.”

The focus of D’s gaze changed once again.

“Wait! Just wait a minute, there. I know you’re real tough and all, but if you go up there, ain’t no way in hell you’re coming back. At least wait and see if that hand of yours comes back before you decide to do anything.”

While the man was saying that, D turned his back to him.

“Hey, I told you to hold on, and I meant it! C’mon.”

Bligh’s cries to stop bounced off the black back of the dwindling figure and vanished.

“Sheesh, be that way, then. Don’t blame me for whatever happens!”

The man stomped his feet and vented his bewilderment to the wind, then turned to look at U-taker’s corpse. If his eyes had opened any wider, they might’ve fallen out of his head.

“He-he’s gone!”

II

“This is an alarming turn of events,” the duchess said, looking up at the midair image of D walking toward them and knitting her brow. “But what a man he is, to dispose of U-taker so easily. I want him. By all means, I want him as a test subject so we might accomplish our aims! He’s not to be killed, Lord Greylancer.”

“I should have expected no less from him. He’s headed right up here,”

Greylancer said, sounding impressed. “Even we know fear. Ageless and undying, yet frail creatures easily reduced to dust by a single wooden stake. But he knows no fear. Look at the way he walks. Aloof, and so powerful. I would expect as much from—”

“But he shan’t gain entrance to the castle. Not ever. If he ever sets foot in here, it shall be as a test subject.”

“Good luck with that,” the left hand said with amusement.

“I don’t think we’ll be able to talk him into being a test subject—but would *you* be willing to change his mind for us?” Greylancer said, looking at the severed limb.

“It wouldn’t do any good. Once he gets it in his mind to fight, the lord of all creation couldn’t stop him.”

“I suppose not. Then it’s time for me to act.”

The Nobleman began to walk away, his back like a wall—or more like a flat megalith. The man who’d up until now said how much he’d like to meet D headed off easily to kill him.

“You mustn’t, Lord Greylancer,” the duchess shouted, but even then he never halted.

The left hand had said not even the lord of all creation could keep D from a fight. If that were the case, then surely not even the master of hell could shake Greylancer’s intent to do battle.

“D’s destruction is the last resort. As a test subject, he’s irreplaceable. If you go, he’s certain to—”

The duchess extended her right hand to her side. A silver button floated there.

Before she could press it, Greylancer’s long spear limned an arc.

Look. Every single thing—machine, OSB, Noble, human, monstrosity—did they not blur like paint rinsing away in water, losing form, being robbed of color and fading away? Even the duchess herself, of all things.

“Stay out of my way, all you figments!” the departing giant said, his voice like

a rumbling rising from deep in the earth. “I was born to fight. So long as there are conflicts and battlefields, those times are mine alone, and those places exist solely for me.”

There was nothing on the floor save the left hand. And even its form seemed vaguely fuzzy.

“Figments, eh? That’s a good one. Well, the Nobility really should be sleeping at this hour. So, Lord Greylancer, do you mean to tell me that *you*, too, are—”

D halted before the path up the incline and looked up at the top of the fortifications.

A gray cape was dancing in the wind. A crimson long spear screamed defiance at the leaden sky.

And then the man leapt down. He landed in front of D—some ten yards away. As soon as his feet touched the ground the earth shuddered, as if groaning from absorbing the impact of the gigantic figure. While it was unclear where they’d been all along, countless birds took to the air. A cry of surprise went up behind the Hunter. Bligh had come with him.

“I am Lord Greylancer,” the giant said by way of introduction once the echoes had died.

“I’ve heard of you. I’m—”

“D,” Greylancer said, smiling. “I’ve heard of you, as well. Rare is the man whose name reaches even the ears of the dead.”

“Is this one of the Sacred Ancestor’s testing grounds?”

“That is correct.”

“Well, then, I’m going up there. You can step aside or not, as you like.”

The Hunter started forward again. Greylancer actually seemed to be kindly watching over him.

Nine yards.

Shadows flitted across ground and sky. The birds. Perhaps the eerie auras the

two of them gave off had driven the creatures mad. However, there seemed to be no animosity between the two as the distance closed, but rather peace.

Five yards.

D's right hand went for the longsword on his back. Greylancer raised the tip of his spear.

No one saw the instant that would separate life from death. Blue sparks shot out, and D's slash from the high position was parried by the long spear Greylancer held out in front of his face.

D stepped forward. Naturally, his blade pressed down.

See how the giant was slowly being driven to his knees?

"This is . . ." Greylancer groaned. "Such strength . . . you frighten me. To the very bottom of my heart. D, do you know why it is that I know fear now?"

There was no reply.

"Nearly ten millennia ago, I met the Sacred Ancestor. And, for reasons I no longer remember, we fought and I was defeated, I believe. I say I believe because, except for the feeling of defeat, all the rest is lost in the depths of forgetfulness. I feared him from the very bottom of my heart. And that was the first time I had ever known there was such a thing. *So, this is fear*, I thought to myself."

The Greater Noble's eyes began to glow red.

"Because of that, I have spent the rest of my life mastering that feeling. But I have yet to do so. At least I can show you some small progress. Like so!"

As if the earth itself were thrusting Greylancer back up, he pushed up with his long spear. A sound reverberated where the blade met the spear, like the roar of a great cannon.

D was sent sailing like a black gale. He collided with a barn that'd been about a hundred feet behind him and off to one side. The wall didn't shatter. The pillars didn't break. The entire structure was blown away.

As D arose from under a pile of rubble, pieces of the building rained down around him, only to be reduced to dust one after another by the force of

impacting on the ground.

Greylancer's spear could even turn a foe it'd hurled away into a weapon of destruction. And the full destructive power of the spear itself had yet to be unveiled.

On receiving the next blow, D, he thought, your face will go pale. The outlines of your body will become oddly unreliable, as if you were presently about to be reduced to dust. Your face will swiftly redden due to the fresh blood gushing from each and every one of its pores...

But D didn't tense for the next blow. On the contrary, he walked forward without any sign of concern. Greylancer donned a look of horror.

"My spear smashed through all the OSB's defenses, yet you take a sweeping blow from it and are still fit to challenge me as if nothing has happened? The only one here who truly has no fear—is you, D."

As if indeed neither of them knew fear, Greylancer's long spear spun, slicing through the wind, then coming to a dead stop aimed exactly at D's heart. The power that blasted from it was a wave for mopping up the opposition—and how was D supposed to counter that without his left hand and its powers of resuscitation?

However, something else was about to open hostilities.

From far beneath the castle—what could be called a subterranean world—an alluring female voice had called out, "Activate the OSB humanoid prototype."

It was a gigantic thing, every bit as large as Greylancer, and dozens of hands supported it. Those disembodied hands hung in midair.

Both D and Greylancer looked up at the thing that floated some fifteen feet above the earth.

"One of the OSB prototypes? That meddling duchess."

As the giant said that, the long spear left his hands.

A mere fifteen feet. The massive form was charred, as U-taker had been, and it was impaled before it could do anything. Every one of the hands pulled away from it. Was it shock or despair that drew such drastic action from them? For as the giant fell and sent up a great splash of water, the hands simultaneously disappeared.

Greylancer went over to the massive form, grabbed his spear by the shaft, and pulled it back out. Bluish-black blood went flying, staining the ground.

“My role here isn’t finished yet, is it? If you can’t rise from that, I shall have to take your head and offer it to D as a sign of contrition,” the Greater Nobleman said to the enormous figure splayed on the ground, striking his own neck with the flat of his hand.

As if in response to that, the massive form sat up. Slitlike eyes gave off a greenish tinge along the sides of a head shaped like an elliptical helmet.

“D, this thing’s job is to replace me in capturing you,” Greylancer said to the Hunter. “Ordinarily I could just dispose of it, but at present I’m tentatively under the command of a certain woman. I can’t do anything too rash, and to be honest I’d like to see exactly how powerful this thing is and how it would do battle with the man called D. I wonder which I should do first?”

“Do as you like,” D replied, his voice driving away the clamor of the rain.

Greylancer looked up at the heavens and shook his head. “Oh, you’re enough to make even a man like me funny in the head. Your voice alone is enough to numb my soul. D, first you and I will—”

“Make it later,” D said, changing direction. The way he faced, the OSB prototype had advanced even farther than Greylancer and was still closing.

A stark light split the world of gray. The somewhat insectlike head of the OSB was split down to the jaw, spilling something bluish-black.

“No time for idle words, eh?” Greylancer clucked.

Though the thing had been brimming with animosity, splitting its head without so much as a word of warning while it advanced empty-handed struck this Nobleman as something of an outrage. The prototype tumbled forward, landing face first with a great spray of mud. Raising his stump of a left arm to

block the splash, D stabbed his blade at the base of the prototype's neck.

No, the tip halted with about half an inch to go. A hand growing out of the prototype's neck clung to the blade, stopping it. There was no way it could catch one of D's deadly blows and hope to come away unscathed. All the hand's fingers were sliced off. As were those of the second hand that appeared, and the third. A fourth appeared. It was a black hand. The palm of it blocked the tip of the sword, there were sparks—and a strident sound rang out. The hand was covered in steel right down to its fingertips. Judging from how freely it moved, it may have been some sort of liquid metal.

"Oh," Greylancer groaned.

A few more hands grew from the prototype's chest and began rubbing where the cut had been, while the prototype got back to its feet with rain rebounding starkly from it. No trace of the wound remained.

"The OSB were physically weak creatures, but who knew their bodies could be used that way? The duchess has outdone herself, changing its tentacles into human hands. Thus far, she succeeded. But what of the rest of the combination, I wonder. Oh?!"

That cry of surprise came because D had kicked off the ground.

A new hand sprouted from the waist of the prototype. The weapon it gripped seemed to be some sort of thermal ray gun. However, it unleashed no shower of blistering heat. The pendant on D's chest was giving off a blue light.

Once more the Hunter leapt, and a stark blade flashed out. The prototype's body was slashed from the left shoulder down to the chest, and it made a massive leap back, hurling a triangular weapon with one of its hands as it did so. The weapon became a triangular fighter plane zipping straight at the leaping D's face, but he narrowly dodged it. It then turned behind him and went on the attack once more. It traveled at Mach 3—several times the speed of sound—and D's body was unable to respond in time. However, his sword could do the trick. As the object flew toward the back of his head, D reached back over his shoulder without even turning and deflected it with his blade. The triangular fighter struck the side of the hill, sinking thirty feet into it.

Greylancer cried out in astonishment.

D looked over at the prototype, which stood still as a statue. The Hunter sailed into the air again, but when he tried to cut his foe down from overhead, his opponent was swallowed up by the earth as if it had been a mirage. It was unclear whether or not the Hunter had glimpsed the pair of hands that'd seized the prototype's ankles at that moment.

Not bothering to stab his blade into the ground, D was instead staring at Greylancer already.

III

"You're an astonishing man," the giant groaned, as if unable to bear the weight of his admiration. There could be little doubt this Nobleman hadn't had cause to speak like that in his life. "That was a biological weapon made by combining an OSB with a human. I'm not sure even I could've fought it off so easily. For you, it was so simple. I'm sure the color has drained from the duchess now that she realizes what an incredible man she's meddling with."

"You're next," D said. He wasn't even breathing hard.

"But of course. Ah, but it's been so long since I had an opponent worth fighting. I shall truly enjoy this!"

His long spear swept toward D, wind and rain swirling in its wake—and at that instant, his body was swallowed up by the ground.

Sheathing his blade without a word, D started walking toward the castle. Greylancer's strange disappearance seemed to have made no impression on him.

From behind him came a cry of "Please, wait!"

Looking at the figure, Bligh bugged his eyes and said, "Arbuckle?!"

The somewhat aged physician/procurer of women walked toward D, looking like a drowned rat. He seemed to have appeared from thin air. The truth was, he had.

"Wait, please. If you go up to the castle now, everyone they caught will be slaughtered."

After a short time, D asked, "Which would you prefer?"

“What?”

“To become one of them, or to die?”

Arbuckle fell silent. He probably hadn’t anticipated such a question.

“The Nobles in the castle hope to collect subjects for their experiments. What did they do to you?”

“What do you mean, what did they do? I’m human. The proof of it is that I’m out in the daytime,” Arbuckle said, spreading his hands.

“So was the guy who was just here,” said D. He was referring to Greylancer.

Arbuckle had nothing to say to that.

“The ones who were abducted have no special meaning to the Nobility. So they’d have no cause to hesitate. As soon as they captured them, they’d use them in their experiments.”

Such cruel reasoning. Both Arbuckle and Bligh were at a loss for words.

“Did you escape?” D asked Arbuckle.

“No, they told me to try and persuade you. They haven’t finished their preparations for capturing you. At any rate, everyone’s lives depend on you.”

Before he’d even heard the last of the man’s words, D had already started walking the path up the slope.

“Don’t let your guard down around him. Sometimes people are pawns of the Nobility without even knowing it.”

Bligh seemed to react to the Hunter’s words. However, he made no move toward attacking Arbuckle, but rather stood out in front of D with his arms spread wide.

“Don’t go. If what he says is true, you’d be murdering those people!”

Never halting, D replied, “My job is hunting the Nobility.”

“Your job? You’re a pro Hunter, right? You get money and a request to cut down some Noble, right? So, who asked you to do this?”

D stopped in his tracks.

Got him, Bligh thought to himself. “That’s what I thought. In that case, it ain’t your job. Just don’t do it, okay? Let’s just wait a little longer and see how this plays out.”

“Then you’ll be stuck here for the rest of your lives.”

Bligh was stunned for a moment, but searched desperately for words nonetheless. “That’s why we need you to come up with a plan with us, okay?”

D’s lips began to move. No doubt he was going to say it was no use. But before he could speak, a new interloper appeared. A horse and rider that’d crossed the bridge behind the Hunter slipped past him to take a place alongside Bligh.

“You again, lady?” the man sneered.

“That’s Josette to you!” the warrior woman corrected him from her seat high in the saddle. “I caught your conversation with a listening device. Please, D, don’t do this. They might still be alive. They might still be human. Don’t let your actions ruin that.”

“She’s right,” Bligh added. “The least you can do is wait till your left hand gets back. C’mon. What do you say we do that?”

Both of them were desperate. Their words were soon lost to the sound of the rain, but the two of them were resolved not to move from where they stood, rain bouncing off their stiff bodies.

D said, “The only one who can stop me is my employer.” And then he started walking again.

“Okay, okay!” Arbuckle shouted out from behind him. “D, I’ll be your employer! I’m hiring you to save us all from the Nobles in the castle.”

“A meaningless request.”

Those words made the hair of the other three stand on end.

D didn’t halt.

Growing flustered, Arbuckle continued, “Then I’ll change my request. You’re to confirm everyone’s safety, and if it’s too late then so be it. Please, destroy the enemy and get us out of here.”

When D turned around, the feeling of relief almost bowled the three of them over.

“Request accepted.”

And saying that, D thrust his blade into the ground and started walking back in the direction from which he’d come. His sword plowed a trough in the mud. Though the rain should’ve quickly filled it again, it didn’t disappear.

“Walk the line,” D said.

All of them understood that this was to prevent them from being dragged underground by the unholy hands.

Arbuckle, Bligh, and the mounted Josette started following the line D had drawn, keeping that order. Even when D crossed the stone bridge, his blade had no trouble carving a shallow line in its surface.

The group reached the same farmhouse where they’d started.

“It’s okay,” said D. By that he probably meant that the shield his left hand had erected was still in effect.

“Oh, that’s right,” Bligh said, smacking his hands together and turning to Josette, who’d led her cyborg horse indoors. “What happened to your hubby?”

“I left him behind.”

“Left him?”

“I heard you folks talking and said I was going to go help stop D. But all he did was snort at that.”

“Well, imagine that—his woman’s more chivalrous than him. Hard to believe, ain’t it.”

“Then believe what you like,” Josette told him. “My husband and I will be working separately until this whole business is settled,” she stated flatly.

“You sure about that, now? Partway through this, don’t go saying you miss your hubby after all, and that you’re still his wife, and then go running out on us!”

As Bligh stepped forward with a wrathful expression, Arbuckle stepped in

between him and Josette, put his hands up in a calming gesture, and said, “Does this seem like the time to be picking a fight? We’re all fortunate survivors—and valued compatriots. We need to work together.”

“Understood,” Josette said softly. In the same tone she continued, “But the next time you speak to me like that, I’ll lop off one of your ears. With the words going straight in, you’ll probably hear a hell of a lot better.”

“You do and I’ll—” Bligh began to reply, but Arbuckle reached around from behind him and covered his mouth.

“Would you act your age? If not, I’m likely to surgically remove your remaining ear when she’s through!” the flesh peddler/doctor barked, and he was serious.

Bligh nodded reluctantly.

Letting go of him, Arbuckle said, “Now, for the sake of those held underground, let me tell you what I’ve seen.”

“Before you do, you’ll have to let us check you out.”

Everyone stared at D.

“Don’t tell me you still suspect me of being—”

“—in league with the Nobility,” There was no mercy to be found in D’s words. “It may be that you’ve been implanted with memories to make you think you’re still human.”

“Hmph. Well then, how will you tell whether I’m human or a servant of the Nobility?”

“Come here,” D said, beckoning to him.

When Arbuckle came over, the Hunter raised his right hand about as high as his shoulder. As a natural reaction, Arbuckle’s eyes followed it. Once he was focused on it, D accomplished his aim.

All Josette and Bligh saw was bright blood squirting from Arbuckle’s neck, and all they heard was the *ching!* of a sword hilt against its scabbard. D had drawn and struck in a single motion.

As the stunned Arbuckle stood there, D extended his right hand to the man's neck and pinched the severed artery. The bleeding ceased. The recuperative powers of human cells were incredibly strong, so that severed limbs, if aligned perfectly and immediately reattached, might heal right down to their very nerve cells and operate no differently than they had before. However, that was only possible with the most skilled use of the very latest medical technology. The way D's fingers had closed the carotid artery and stopped the bleeding with a single pinch was a startling phenomenon far beyond human or Noble ability. What's more, when his hand came away, there wasn't so much as a drop of blood on it.

"D, what did you just—?" Josette asked.

"When a slash is made at a Noble's carotid artery, it winds up being off by a thousandth of a millimeter, no exceptions. In his case, he was cut exactly where I aimed."

"Pretty brutal test you've got there," Bligh said in a hollow, almost mechanical tone.

"Let's hear what you have to say," D told the doctor, making a wave of his right hand.

All Arbuckle's arterial spray had fallen to the floor. The echoes of steel being sheathed left all of them trembling.

The Black Dragnet

chapter 6

I

So, it's positively no use?"

"Essentially," Greylancer said in a voice like creaking iron.

Not disguising her disappointment, the duchess said, "In that case, I most definitely want him. What if we were to threaten to kill the hostages one by one if D doesn't turn himself over to us?"

Her question was directed not at Greylancer, but at the thing on the floor.

"Now *that* is what you'd really call useless. The only reason he protects humans is because it's his job. When it's not, he's the kind of guy who could have a massacre happening right in front of him and walk by without raising an eyebrow."

"Well, isn't that something," Greylancer said with a sarcastic grin. "I don't believe it though. But if a part of his body says so, there's no reason for me to say otherwise."

"Then we have no choice. We shall go with our last resort," the duchess said, her tone changed.

Realizing that her remarks were directed toward itself, the left hand trembled. In fact, it backed away a good foot.

The time finally came when the others knew for sure that, even shut behind the clouds, day had still existed. The hues of the village were being tinged with blue, and the light was failing.

D was gazing out one of the hall's windows at the rain, which had let up just a bit. Naturally, not only his eyes, but his ears and his very skin had undoubtedly been honed to deal with the threat of the Nobility, but as he gave off his ghastly air—or rather the jewel-like radiance of his uniquely heaven-sent beauty—those who'd just returned from another room melted away in rapture.

Arbuckle and even Bligh were entranced by the Hunter, while Josette reflexively turned her face away, making no attempt to even look at him. Finally, she looked out the window and said to him in a somewhat absent-minded tone, "It's not going to stop raining, is it?"

"What about your husband?" D asked.

"Huh?" she blurted out at the completely unexpected query. But she immediately realized he wasn't inquiring as to the health of her husband or her own state of mind. "You're wondering whether or not he's been attacked by the Nobility, aren't you? I've been to see him since we got here, but he says he doesn't want to throw in with the rest of us. That's just the sort of person he is."

"Surely he realizes it was the Nobility that constructed this village. Why isn't he concerned for his own well-being?"

"I don't know. But he's a born misanthrope."

"He was with you."

"Somehow or other, we got along. I used to work in a saloon. He came in one day. When I heard he was a warrior, I asked him to take me away with him. After a job in that saloon, I thought I could stand anything."

"Why'd you let him go his own way?"



“Because we weren’t going to be together forever,” Josette replied, heaving a sigh. “He spared no effort to teach me every last thing about being a warrior, from the ground up, but he only did it to make his own life easier. Before I’d even mastered the use of my weapons, he had me fighting the enemy in his place. Once I somehow managed to knock them flat, he’d come out and finish them off.”

“I’m surprised he let you go.”

“I pumped a round into his right leg before I left,” Josette said, stroking the barrel of the minigun.

“The Nobility will go after him.”

“That’s fine by me now. Forget him. Besides, it’s not like you care what happens to him. Why the sudden interest?”

“Long ago, I met a warrior about the same age as your husband,” the Hunter replied. “He said he wanted to run into a Noble before he got too old.”

“So he could say he’d taken out at least one?”

“He said he wanted to become a Noble.”

Josette shut her eyes and somehow kept herself from collapsing. Rubbing hard at her temple, she said, “It can’t be,” but it sounded like she was trying to convince herself.

“I’ve heard the same thing from four people, male and female alike. All of them were warriors.”

“Why?”

“Those who fight for a living desire immortality more than anyone.”

“But still . . . becoming a Noble . . . ?” Suddenly realizing something, she gazed at D. Before rapture could overcome her, Josette said, “You don’t mean to tell me—my husband wants that, too?”

“You don’t recall ever hearing him mention it?”

“Not a word. However . . .”

“You’ve thought about it, haven’t you?”

Josette was assailed by a feeling like heaven and earth had just turned topsy-turvy. Before she could even deny it, it forced her to say, “Yes, I have. I’ve thought so time and time again. Every time I’ve had to fight and fight until I was covered in blood. *I wish I were a Noble*, I’d think to myself.”

Josette wished she could deny what she’d just said, and desperately endeavored to change the subject, asking, “If you think that’s what he’s up to, why leave him to his own devices?”

D just kept staring out the window. It seemed as though he hadn’t moved a single muscle since Josette had come over.

“Even if he becomes a Noble . . . you wouldn’t be scared of him, would you? After all, he’s only human, right?”

D’s reply was, “Someone’s coming.”

“Huh?”

Shooting over to the window so quickly she seemed likely to burst right through it, Josette peered out through the blue air.

A beautiful woman in a white dress was walking toward them from the river.

“She’s carrying something. I think—it’s your left hand?!”

“I believe you’re familiar with this, are you not?” the woman said, holding the thing high with her right hand in a spot not far distant—less than thirty feet from the farmhouse. “I am Duchess Heldarling, and I oversee this facility. We have this part of your body in our possession. If you’d like it safely reattached, D, you should come to us peacefully.”

The part about being reattached would’ve undoubtedly caused the left hand to laugh.

D went outside.

Josette slammed the chair beside her against the wall. First Bligh appeared, then Arbuckle. Josette gave a toss of her chin—and the two of them pressed their faces to the windowpanes. They wore looks of desperation.

The rebounding rain outlined D's form in white.

"Is *it* okay?" D inquired.

"Of course. It's right here."

"I have no time to fool around with illusions. I'll head right up there."

"Well, that settles matters quickly enough."

"However," the Hunter continued, "I have a condition. Those in this farmhouse, the other man, and the ones you abducted are all to be safely released from the village."

"That's a substantial condition, but are you in any position to be making such demands?" the duchess said with a sarcastic grin. But her smile immediately froze. For she had sensed the unearthly aura emanating from every inch of D.

"Do you agree to that?" asked D.

"Very well," the duchess replied, though it took her a second to do so.

The trio inside the house exchanged looks.

"Okay, then release them immediately. As soon as I see that happen, I'll join you."

"Good enough," the duchess said with a nod.

And the left hand said, "I'm really sorry about this."

Returning to the farmhouse, D told the group, "You heard what we said. Get going."

Bligh was the first to speak, asking in a probing tone, "Can you believe anything a Noble says?"

"It's better than remaining here, isn't it?"

"You've got a point there."

"I wonder if the others will still be human when they get back," said Josette. Her lovely features were hardened.

If those who came back bore the marks of the Nobility's fangs on the napes of their necks, she was well aware they might try and get the rest of them to lower

their guard before baring their teeth. And while D might have a way to see through their game, Josette and the others wouldn't.

"That's not a certainty," D said, reaching his right hand into his coat and pulling out a glass vial about the size of a cigarette. It was filled with a yellow powder. "It's garlic extract," he told them. "Sprinkle some on the others before you head out with them."

"Not sure quite why we should, but okay," the warrior woman replied.

As Josette was eyeing the glass vial intently, Arbuckle said, "You ignored me and went ahead with your negotiations, even though I'm your employer!"

"Our contract is on hold for the moment. But I'll take responsibility for you in the meantime."

"Oh," Arbuckle replied, staring at the high-handed Hunter more with curiosity than anger. "But we can't take the word of any Noble. They view humans as no more than livestock. And who strikes a bargain with livestock? However, I do have faith in my contract with you. I hear the man called D would sooner die than go back on his word. So, how do you intend to take responsibility for us while we're out of your sight?"

"Take this," D said, producing a foot-tall doll from inside his coat.

The doll was made of wood and of strangely beautiful proportions, yet no eyes, nose, or mouth had been carved in its face. D raised his other arm, hiding the doll and his own face behind his coat. Sensing something weird—or supernatural, to be more precise—the three of them stiffened, but just then he lowered his coat.

On catching the doll the Hunter tossed him, Arbuckle looked down at its neck and let out a low groan. Seeing the same thing just shortly thereafter, Josette and Bligh both took sharp breaths. On the doll's chest were a pair of small but distinct holes, black as if they were packed with darkness. Teeth marks. And nothing in the world could've been more beautiful.

"What's this supposed to—" Arbuckle finally began when he could once again squeeze out some words.

"They're coming," D said.

The other three went slowly to the windows and gazed out at the blue world.

Three figures were approaching through the rain. Jan, Beth, and Emily. Even in this faint light interspersed with rain, the joy at being released that filled their faces was clearly visible. The trio raced toward them, sending water splashing up everywhere.

“We’ve been saved,” Jan said, panting for breath between the words.

“Do we have you to thank?” Emily asked, still clinging to Jan’s arm.

“I was out of my mind with worry, not knowing when they were bound to drink our blood,” Beth said, one hand pressed to her chest as she tried to catch her breath.

As they started for the back room, Josette stopped them, saying, “Just a minute.”

The trio wore dubious expressions as light yellow powder sailed through the air. Josette had scattered the contents of the glass vial.

“What’s all this?” Beth said with a grimace, brushing it off. The other two followed suit. They didn’t know it was garlic, or what effect it was supposed to have. For all the Nobility’s weaknesses had been erased from human memory.

“I know you want to check us, but we’re not in with the Nobility. So, what do you think?” Emily asked, pursing her cute lips.

“Yes, it would seem you’re not,” Josette said with a nod.

“D!” the duchess said, her voice coming from outside. “My subordinates will now lead the group out of the village. Once you’ve seen that completed for yourself, come up to the castle.”

“Understood.”

After the Hunter had given his reply, Josette went off to get her husband, while four more men on horseback stopped in front of the farmhouse. They must’ve been servants of the Nobility. They were leading a string of five horses. There was one less than the number in the party.

The reason for that soon became clear. Josette came back alone.

“He’s vanished. Is this your doing?” the warrior woman asked, throwing a look of mingled anger and resignation at the duchess, who ignored it.

“Well, I shall be waiting at the castle.”

Having said that, the duchess and the left hand vanished. As D had indicated, they were an illusion.

The group headed for the entrance to the village. No one said a word about Josette’s husband.

Like a white thread the highway twisted and turned out beyond the gigantic trees and the pounding rain.

“This is as far as you go,” one of the men told D.

D watched in silence as the group left with many a backward glance, and then he and two of the men wheeled their horses around. Any feelings or opinions he might’ve held about the fate of those people were trapped behind the bluish darkness, and the handsome, rain-lashed features remained merely cold and beautiful.

II

After crossing through the village and riding straight up the hill, D turned and looked.

The hoofbeats of the riders accompanying him had suddenly ceased. Both the two men and their horses had vanished. Perhaps it was because their duty was done.

Still astride his cyborg horse, D continued on to the hall. One of the doors was open. He passed through it without halting.

There was darkness. The door closed behind him with an old-fashioned sound, and then there was a pair of Nobles standing before D.

“We’ve been waiting for you, D,” the duchess said with a smile. Her canine teeth gleamed. In her right hand she held his severed left hand.

“What about my hand?” D asked.

The duchess raised her right hand.

“I have no use for an illusion.”

Donning a wry grin, the Noblewoman waved her right hand. The left hand dissolved into thin air. It had indeed been an illusion.

“There’s no fooling the man known as D,” Greylancer remarked, a cool smile rising on his lips. He continued, “Your left hand escaped. Even now, it’s probably somewhere in this subterranean chamber. I know not what kind of trick it’s using, but none of our sensors can locate it, which is an impressive feat in itself.”

His praise was completely heartfelt. Apparently that was the sort of Nobleman he was.

“Then there’s nothing for us to discuss.”

Perhaps the duchess felt something in D’s words, for her expression stiffened.

“Well, just wait a moment,” Greylancer said, stepping between them. “I’ve discussed this with the duchess, and we aren’t necessarily at odds with you. This facility is exploring new possibilities for the Nobility, in keeping with the wishes of the Sacred Ancestor. You dhampirs are one example of this. However, though your kind descends from both humans and Nobility, rather than combining the strengths of both, they all seem to rather conspicuously assemble all their shortcomings.”

Greylancer’s statement was accurate. With both Noble and human parents, dhampirs inherited roughly half of the Nobility’s monstrous strength that could bend steel beams, their ability to leap ten feet high and sail another thirty feet, their ability to be equally at home in temperatures that were sub-zero or boiling hot, and the healing abilities that could recover from any wound in less than ten minutes’ time. They also maintained the cruelty that could be considered the very core of a Noble’s nature, as well as their habit of drinking blood. While they were more suited than anyone on Earth to work as Vampire Hunters, they also caused incidents as horrifying as the Nobility themselves. It was on account of this that even now the humans who feared the Nobility would bow and scrape and pay dhampirs handsomely to work for them, yet never let their employees escape their looks of hatred and suspicion.

Greylancer’s eyes remained boring through D as he continued, “You are such

an exception to that it's almost the stuff of legend. Your skill at combat surpasses that of Nobles, and while you've inherited the cruelty and callousness we ourselves are powerless to change, you couple that with human kindness—such is your reputation. Therefore, we wish to examine you. Just a drop of your blood or a single cell, and we might accomplish that for which we've labored hundreds of thousands of moonlit nights, and then I might return to my rest. Even if my sleep is stained with blood. What say you? The duchess may be a bit overbearing, but I like a man who fights. Allow me to retract what I said earlier. I have no wish to fight now. And if you will but cooperate with us, I swear by the name of Greylancer that both you and your left hand will be allowed to leave here alive. How is that?"

"You leveled a spear at me," D said, his reply causing the giant to tremble.

"That was stupid of me," Greylancer groaned. "At the time, I didn't realize how fearsome you were. However, now we have your decision. D, we shall perform our examination on your corpse!"

The giant made a swing of the long spear in his right hand. A wild wind snarled, racing to all the far corners of this cyberspace, a place that didn't seem to suit it at all.

"What's this?" the left hand murmured. It had sensed something abnormal in the flow of the air around it. "This is no ordinary lust for blood—could it be *he* is here?"

Atop one of the countless rails hanging from the stone ceiling, the left hand held tight with all five of its fingers, then continued another thirty feet straight ahead. It clawed at the rail to propel itself along.

This was a sinister room, and it seemed like another world from where Greylancer and the duchess were. The endless stone pillars and canopy ceiling were cruelly cracked, with fragments of both littering the floor. Apparently flames were burning toward the back, as their hues, sounds, and heat traveled around the room.

"So, analog accommodations right next door to modern ones? Hell, they don't make it easy to come up with a plan of attack."

After going from rail to rail and turning more corners down more corridors than it could count, the left hand cried out in surprise, “What in the—?!”

Suddenly, a vast factory spread before it. And it hardly suited the scientific achievements of the Nobility, but rather was in keeping with the unrivaled love the vampires had for the past—machinery of riveted iron, rows of chains hanging from the ceiling, antiquated analog gauges, flames, and steam shooting up from nowhere in particular, and a heavy, uncomfortably warm atmosphere. Disregarding the coldness of the inorganic machinery, it was the spreading waves of unearthly miasma that truly represented the factory.

“Yeah, that’s the Nobility for you. Even their factories reek of sorcery.”

The left hand lowered its wrist and raised the rest of itself. The eyes in the face that formed in it surveyed its surroundings with cautious curiosity, then narrowed unexpectedly.

“Oh, what have we here?” it said, the words slipping from it.

Leaping from one rail to the next with terrifying speed, in no time at all it came to a spot right above some tables secured in one corner of the vast factory. There were two of them. On one, a man in a white top and bottom was tied down with rubber straps, while about ten feet away on the right-hand side was what was clearly an alien creature, and it too was immobilized. The bodies of both had countless tubes running into them, which in turn pumped them full of liquids in a rainbow of hues.

The left hand knew that the one in white was U-taker, and the weird-looking one was a prototype.

“Hmm, looks like these clowns were sent to slay D and met with some stiff resistance. But to lose to him and still survive—that’s a miracle. This is a half-assed way of doing things, though. Guess I’ve got to get to the bottom of things after all.”

The hoarse voice finished saying that as the left hand landed on U-taker’s head.

“Whoopsy-daisy!”

Nearly slipping off, it grabbed onto U-taker’s hair to pull itself up, and let out

a deep, exhausted breath.

“Hmm, maybe I should try pulling something else,” the hoarse voice said with a malicious laugh.

The fact that creatures as advanced as the Nobility hadn't set up a surveillance system in what was, in a manner of speaking, a treatment center for their most powerful warriors went beyond mere carelessness; it was insanity. But then, perhaps that, too, was rooted in their love of nostalgia.

Springing up easily, the left hand landed on some tubes that connected tanks hanging from the ceiling to U-taker. To all appearances, they were for no more than pumping drugs for medical treatment. The hand grabbed the tubes and used all its weight to twist, then pull, finally managing to tear five of them free at the same time.

Medical solutions sprayed through the air as tubes whipped around like snakes. It was unclear if this was really intended as a treatment, since when two of the liquids came into contact on the floor, they instantly burst into flames.

“Oh, that's nice. Burn, baby, burn. That way, we can split their attention. Between *him* and *here*.”

The flames came into contact with another solution, sending up a fresh fireball.

The left hand started yanking tubes out of the patient on the neighboring table—the OSB prototype. The floor became a sea of flames.

Having clambered up a control panel to the top of a rail, the left hand saw the flames envelop the two figures on the tables.

“Burn away to ashes, you goddamned factory!”

But there was an objection to the hoarse cries.

A pair of fireballs had risen from the burning tables. A heartbeat later, U-taker and the prototype appeared, scattering flames everywhere.

The two of them faced each other. The prototype dropped to its knees.

“A gravity field attack?!” the left hand groaned.

If that were the case, it would crush any object, no matter how great its density. However, the prototype got to its feet. The left hand noticed that it now had a bizarre covering on it.

“Are those hands?!”

Innumerable hands were interlocked around the prototype, forming a kind of armor to shield it from the gravity field attack.

“Just what in hell’s name were they working on here? Is this supposed to be one of their ‘new possibilities’? The idiots! It’s not beautiful at all!”

Two of the prototype’s hands rose, their palms pointing toward U-taker. What kind of power did they direct toward him? Up on top of a rail, the left hand was assailed by an intense vertigo and started to slip, only narrowly catching hold of the edge of the rail and preventing itself from falling. Its eyesight returned just as U-taker was staggering backward into the flames. It had to wonder if he was out of his mind, but he seemed to pay the flames no heed at all. And the prototype made no attempt to go after him, walking off in the opposite direction instead. Flames eddied there, too.

“They’re completely pissed off. Heh heh heh! Can’t wait to see the next time they run into each other!”

As the left hand chortled derisively, the hands of the flames grabbed at it from below.

The murderous intent that’d linked the pair of would-be combatants evaporated like mist when the warning rang.

“Save that for later,” the duchess said, turning her eyes to midair, and a room engulfed in flames appeared at the same height, immediately joined by the passages running from the room on all sides. A schematic of the entire floor had been rendered.

“This is Repair Sector Two. If the room’s continued existence poses a danger, activate the self-destruct mechanism. However, trouble in the very place those two are kept—that can only be your left hand’s doing,” the beautiful woman said bitterly.

“When the rest of the body is like this, even a part of it is bound to do great things. I suppose you could say it’s in its blood, couldn’t you?” Greylancer remarked with a broad grin. Apparently he was quite different at heart from other Nobles.

Running her eyes over the rapidly changing schematics, the duchess let a single phrase escape: “Oh no.”

“What is it?”

“U-taker and the prototype have escaped. And the modifications to their psyches weren’t yet completed. As it stands, they’ll be like demons unleashed.”

“That should be interesting.” That remark came not from D, but rather from Greylancer. “To be honest, I’ve always wanted to fight one of those two. Which one would you have me deal with? I can leave negotiations with D to you, Duchess.”

“Wait,” D called out to the Nobleman, taking a step forward. “I’ll go with you.”

“Now, just a moment—” the duchess began.

But Greylancer turned and told her, “No, it’ll be fine. I’ll see to it he comes back safe and sound.”

With that assurance from Greylancer, the two of them headed toward the elevator. Indeed, that was where the elevator should’ve been, but what awaited them was a station for an elliptical vehicle called a *mover*. Once they sat down facing each other, the point of light at the front of the vehicle surged away at incredible speed.

“Why did you accompany me?” Greylancer inquired. Though he was the very picture of dignity, he seemed to be enjoying this on some level.

“This interests me, too,” said D.

Greylancer’s eyes became invested with a gleam.

“Interested in what new forms of life are being created, eh? Is it because that’s what *you* are, too?”

Silence from the Hunter.

“I fear I’ve said something boorish. But there would be no new forms of life if we didn’t make them. And new things offer expanded possibilities. It’s toward that end we produce them.”

“How many attempts have been made?”

“Roughly three million, I hear.”

“How many successes?”

“Zero.”

“Then the folly knows no end, does it?”

“Those were our orders. And no one disobeys the Sacred Ancestor.”

“You have three samples to combine: human, Noble, and OSB. Which combination is the most promising?”

“A combination of all three—or so I wish I could say, but while OSB with human is fine, Noble with OSB is like oil and water. In that case, human/Noble hybrids are possible. They’re quite flexible, you see.”

“Why don’t you combine all three?”

“Orders from the Sacred Ancestor. The reason for that we don’t know—at least, not *for certain*,” Greylancer said, his expression hardening.

D quickly discerned that it was the work of the Nobleman’s memories.

“Why not?” the Hunter pressed him.

“This is the stuff of legend. They say the Sacred Ancestor once constructed a starship on his own and traveled the universe for about a year. And when he returned, not to Earth for some reason but to an asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, unbeknownst to anyone he brought several OSB with him.”

Greylancer continued his tale, with D listening intently. Shadows and flames intermingled on the faces of the pair.

“This is no more than legend, mind you. The Sacred Ancestor had his own private research facility on one of those asteroids. But it’s said that within ten days’ time, the asteroid had been destroyed. The reason for that is unclear. The Sacred Ancestor never shed any light on any of it. But according to the legends,

the Sacred Ancestor had manipulated OSB, human, and Noble genes and created something. They say *it* was the reason that asteroid vanished. After that, the Sacred Ancestor put an end to research to combine the genes of all three species for all time.”

When Greylancer finished speaking, he stared at the beautiful young man. The Hunter’s face held not a trace of emotion about the fearsome conclusion of that tale or its horrifying implications for the future.

What a man!

While there was admiration, at the same time another emotion coursed through every vein in the Nobleman’s body. A will to fight that burned crimson.

“Well, fortunately the duchess and I are both widely recognized as faithful devotees of the Sacred Ancestor. There will be no combining of the three species in this facility.”

“But if you wanted to, you could?”

“I would say—probably. That’s the sort of thing this facility is for. We have both the equipment and the raw materials.”

“U-taker is a combination of Noble and human. The prototype is Noble and OSB. Either would be relatively simple to modify.”

“And I believe I already explained this. Neither the duchess nor I would ever —”

D said, “What about the two of them?”

Greylancer’s expression changed. He’d understood what D was driving at.

“The long and short of it is, they’re no more than test subjects. It would never occur to them to modify themselves.”

“You’re a trusting one. Don’t really seem like a Noble.”

It was unclear whether the Hunter’s remark was an honest assessment or simply a dig. Greylancer was twisting his lips when the vehicle halted without a sound.

“Whatever the case, if we destroy them, that’s the end of it. D, stay out of

this. This is my job.”

The two of them got up. They left the vehicle at the same time.

They were still inside the building. Greylancer looked up in the air, and then an image of U-taker walking down a corridor appeared there.

“What about the prototype?” asked D.

“It’s not showing up. In point of fact, it smashed the sensors.”

“Clever thing, isn’t it?”

For the first time, the giant turned a look of loathing on D.

The duchess’s face appeared right next to U-taker.

“The prototype has gone missing. Do you know where it is?” Greylancer asked her.

“At present, the sensors are being upgraded. They should be able to tell us that shortly.”

“Understood. I’ll set about disposing of U-taker.”

“Very well. Be careful.”

By the time the duchess vanished, the two of them were already silently headed toward the door up ahead.

III

Dark troubles roiled in Bligh’s heart. They’d be hitting the highway soon. With servants of the Nobility guarding both the fore and the rear, they were safe—as if he could ever imagine anyone saying that. The rain still hadn’t relented, only serving to darken the blue of the sky.

Josette was riding right beside Bligh, and he said to her in a low voice, “Once we hit the highway, that’s when things will really start happening.”

“I know. You’d better keep on your toes, too. I’ve got a feeling we’ve got more to worry about from the three who came back than those two servants.”

“You think so? But there wasn’t any problem when you put D’s powder on ’em.”

“That’s why I just say I’ve got a feeling. Noble brains aren’t like ours,” Josette said to him. “Maybe they’ve come up with some way around the effects of that powder.”

“So you don’t think they’ll really let us leave just like that?”

“Maybe we’re just overthinking this.”

“What about the ol’ flesh peddler?”

“He’s getting along nicely with rest of the group.”

Bligh turned and looked. About six feet behind him, there was Arbuckle in his suit, laughing crudely in the midst of the returnees Jan, Beth, and Emily. Apparently he’d just dusted Emily again with the powder. Jan did not look pleased.

“If things go south, you think we’ll be okay?”

“The doll we got from D—he’s got it, doesn’t he?” Josette said, looking concerned too.

Just then, streaks of white came into view up ahead, running to either side. It was the highway.

The Noble lackey who rode at the fore had already halted his steed.

“This is as far as we go,” said the one bringing up the rear. “Here we part company. Safe journeys to you.”

The rider at the fore wheeled his cyborg horse around and rode right by the group before galloping off with his compatriot from the rear.

Bligh turned around and said to Jan and the others, “That was just too easy. It gives me the creeps. I guess this is where we split up, too.”

“Aren’t we headed the same way?” Jan replied.

“Well, it’s raining, and I’m in a hurry. The rest of you can take your time. So long!”

And, having said that, he drove his heels into his steed’s flanks and promptly galloped off. He quickly pulled farther and farther away from the group. All sense of the people behind him was swiftly swallowed up by the splashing

hoofbeats.

“That’s the end of it. Good luck, everybody.”

Still, the man strained his ears, hoping that Josette at least would give chase, but there was no sign of that happening.

“Screw it, then.” And with that, Bligh decided not to give them another thought. “I’ll be there soon, Musse.”

He gave another dig to his steed’s flanks.

The rain lashed every inch of him—his face, in particular. He felt like he was riding underwater. The faster his horse went, the harder it became to breathe.

Before a full minute had passed, Bligh grunted, “Huh?”

Up ahead were the silhouettes of a number of riders.

“At a time like this? It couldn’t be . . .”

He didn’t think there’d be travelers out. And that led to another, unbelievable concern.

Never halting his horse, Bligh pulled up alongside the last of the riders. Those riding side by side up ahead turned and looked.

“What’s this?” said the wide-eyed Jan.

The rest of the riders quickly turned, one after another. It was the same group he’d just left—with Josette riding at the fore.

They all halted.

“What are you doing behind us?” Josette asked. The barrel of her weapon was trained on him. The warrior woman wasn’t gentle in her response.

“Damned if I know. But it looks like those fucking Nobles don’t plan on letting us out of the village!”

“But we’re on the highway!” Emily said, trembling.

“No, have a look.”

Perhaps sensing something from Bligh’s words and his bearing, Josette turned forward again and tossed her chin in that direction.

About fifteen or twenty feet ahead, a path broke off to the right. They'd seen this place before. That was the way to the village. It was the way they'd left. And also the way they'd come back.

"I ain't going back," Bligh said, grinding his teeth together.

"So, what do you propose we do, then?" Josette asked sarcastically. "The Nobility are ordering us to return to the village. They never had any intention of letting us leave. And now we don't have D around either."

"Shit!"

"What'll we do?"

"Plan A," Arbuckle suggested.

Angered by the man's seemingly guileless tone, Bligh turned and snapped, "You got some brilliant idea, whoremonger?"

"Fortunately, we're outside the village. All we need to do now is wait for daybreak. It'll mean sticking it out in the rain, but it's either that or keep riding in circles on the same road."

Bligh felt his anger fading. Now that he'd heard it said aloud, it made sense. If they waited for dawn outside the village, even if it was raining cats and dogs, the Nobility couldn't lay a hand on them.

"That's a good idea," Josette said, putting her weight behind the suggestion. "As luck would have it, I have a tent. Camping out here on the road might be just the thing."

"Great!"

Jan and Emily nodded, and the whole group dismounted. All but one—Beth didn't move.

"There's no point staying there," Bligh said to her.

Her pale face remained hardened as she replied, "I get the feeling it won't do any good."

"What won't do any good?" Arbuckle asked, coming over and taking the horse by the bridle.

“I don’t know. I just have this feeling that no matter what we do, it won’t do any good.”

“You’ve got the Noble sickness, have you?” Arbuckle practically spat.

The Noble sickness was a term used for when young girls were so terribly afraid of vampires they became mentally ill, imagining that Nobles surrounded them twenty-four hours a day—at least, that was symptomatic of the first stage. Following that, the secondary symptoms were to declare that they’d been bitten and drained of blood, refusing to step outside their homes and progressively growing weaker and weaker until they eventually died, though that wasn’t the worst possible outcome.

When told by the hypnotist that they had a hot branding iron, a person in a deep hypnotic state could be touched with a simple piece of wood and still develop blisters and burn marks on their skin. Victims of the Noble sickness, though free of wounds on their necks, could actually develop bite marks and declare, “I’m a Noble.” And they would proceed to attack one person after another.

That in itself doesn’t seem so serious, but the real problem was that those who’d been bitten became infected with the same fearful delusion. Despite the fact that there was absolutely zero involvement by the Nobility, the fear of them that riddled people on a deeply subconscious level could allow the bite of a mentally unbalanced girl to spread like wildfire, increasing the number of self-declared Nobles in a geometric progression. There were cases where entire villages had been wiped out. Even if someone didn’t become a Noble, the powerless feeling of being targeted by the Nobility was part of the sickness. And Arbuckle judged that to be the case here.

“You’re a doctor, aren’t you?” said one of the travelers. “Fix her up. At any rate, get her down from there.”

The others pulled the tent out of the baggage and set it up. Bligh helped them.

“Hey,” Arbuckle called over to him.

“Shut your hole. What, do you want me to call you a quack now?” Bligh said as he turned.

But Arbuckle wasn't looking at him. He was facing the same way as Beth. And as Bligh made that three, he bugged his eyes.

They weren't on the road. To either side of them were enormous trees and great hills of dirt. And beyond them there were scattered houses that they recognized in the moonlight.

"The village." The words prickled in Bligh's mouth and echoed in his brain. "We're back. But how?"

"We can't get out of here," Jan groaned, holding Emily close. "We'll be stuck in the village for the rest of our lives."

"No, not me! Do something!"

"There's nothing I can do."

"You're gutless. Useless!"

The girl's denunciation was so harsh it drew the attention of the rest of the group, leaving them standing there, stunned and rooted. Having watched this pair support and encourage each other ever since the massive flood, the others found her transformation difficult to believe.

"For the love of God, do something!" she said, pounding her fists against Jan's chest, her actions leaving the others in a silent gloom.

"I know. Let's head back to the highway," Jan said, his reply stunning Bligh.

"What are you talking about? Can't you get it through that thick skull of yours we're not getting out of here?"

Ignoring him, Jan put Emily on one of the cyborg horses.

Before Bligh could do anything, Josette grabbed the horse's reins.

"Stop it. If you persist in this foolishness, you'll only be courting death."

"Shut up!" Jan snapped, raising his fist.

There was a thud, and Josette staggered.

"Knock it off!" Bligh cried, jumping between them, and the tip of a boot shot up at his solar plexus. The elbow he used to narrowly block it was left numb.

“Stop!”

By that point, Jan was already up in the saddle.

“Let’s go, Emily.”

Bligh rubbed his right arm as he watched the two riders gallop off, splashing rain everywhere.

“What came over them all of a sudden?”

“You can’t blame them,” Beth said sadly. “Even if we go back to the village, there’s no guarantee we’ll survive.”

“D’s there.”

“He doesn’t care about us. He just does whatever suits him. There’s no way anybody as gorgeous as all that has the same sort of feelings we do. Somebody that beautiful can only bring destruction to normal folks like us.”

The sound of the rain intensified. Everyone had fallen silent.

“You may be right,” Josette said. She was holding her left cheek. “At any rate, let’s go back to the village for the time being. Same house as before should be good, okay?”

I’d make it a different house—that was the thought that formed in Bligh’s mind, but he choked it back. Now that they were back, they were all under surveillance by the Nobility. No matter where they went, that wouldn’t change.

It was seven minutes later that four drowned rats in vinyl raincoats plodded wearily back to their nest.

Wandering The Demon Castle

chapter 7

I

Once he was done toweling off and changing his clothes, Bligh felt like he'd come back to life. "Paradise, pure paradise," he said, sprawling on a bed.

Just then, Josette came in and said, "I think it best we all stay awake together until dawn. Let's head into the living room."

"Yes, ma'am," Bligh grumbled reluctantly, but as the same thought had occurred to him, he went out into the living room without further complaint. Beth and Arbuckle were already there. They were side by side, peering out a window.

"Hey, what's going on?" Bligh asked.

Beth replied, "Someone's coming."

"Come for us already?" Bligh said, adjusting his grip on the spear and taking their spot at the window.

Something was indeed coming that way through the rain. A figure—no, two. One of them was carrying the other. The two of them had almost reached the farmhouse before it became evident they were Jan and Emily.

There was a pounding at the door.

"Don't open it," Bligh told the others, and he went over to it instead. Naturally, he was concerned about whether or not the two of them had been

attacked.

“Please, open up,” Jan said in a voice that seemed to creep from the depths of the earth. “The two of us went out to the road . . . but no matter how long we followed it . . . we always came back to the same place . . . And finally . . . a tree fell . . . Lost our horses . . . and our bags . . . Got hurt, too . . . Hurry up . . . Hurry up and let us in . . . please.”

Bligh clucked his tongue. Head and heart both vacillated.

“We can’t,” Josette said, the barrel of her gun aimed at the door. She had more of a handle on the situation than Bligh did.

Bligh looked at the other two.

“We can’t,” Beth said flatly.

Sighing sadly in his heart, Bligh asked Arbuckle, “What do you say we do?”

“I leave that to you.”

Don’t just shrug this off, Bligh thought, bracing himself for the worst. Turning toward the door, he said, “Sorry, but we can’t. We’ve got no proof you two ain’t fallen into the Nobility’s hands. Huh?” Bligh exclaimed, finally noticing that there was no longer any indication of anyone outside the door. He called out to them, but still there was no answer.

“Look out the window!” the man said.

Beth raced over, then cried out, “They’ve collapsed!”

“I’m opening it up!” Bligh declared.

Disregarding Josette’s shouts not to, the man opened the door.

Jan lay right in front of the door, with Emily still cradled in his arms. The blood that soaked the right half of his body bright red was now painting a ring around him.

“Sheesh,” Bligh said, the word escaping in a low tone.

The right side of Jan’s head was horribly crushed. Emily’s head no longer resembled one at all.

Checking both for a pulse and looking at their pupils, Bligh let out a deep sigh.

“I’m surprised they made it back here. Okay, we’ve gotta bury ’em.”

D and Greylancer appeared in one of the corridors.

“He’s here!” Greylancer said, using his long spear to point up ahead.

D, too, had noted U-taker so far off he couldn’t be seen with the naked eye.

“Leave this to me,” Greylancer said, stepping forward. He was poised to hurl his long spear. “If we dispose of him, at least, there seems little chance of anyone making any strange creations.”

And saying that, the Nobleman made his throw.

An instant later, U-taker staggered. The crimson long spear stabbed through his chest and protruded from his back.

“Well done,” D said, because there had been essentially no time lag between when the Nobleman had hurled his weapon and when it’d pierced his target. This was the very definition of ungodly speed. Would D’s own speed at drawing and striking with his blade be a match for it?

“I’ll deliver the coup de grace,” Greylancer said, walking forward with bold strides. He was unarmed. Though there was absolutely nothing the giant could do if D were to try to cut him down at that moment, he didn’t seem the least bit afraid.

When the Nobleman had closed to about ten yards, U-taker’s body unexpectedly became a blur.

“That’s not good.”

Before Greylancer had even finished saying the words, something white flew from D’s right hand. The needle of unfinished wood went through U-taker’s body and jabbed into the floor. It was followed by a second, but a split second before it was to pierce him, the enemy vanished without a sound.

“He wasn’t destroyed. If he had been, there’d be dust left,” Greylancer said, his lips twisting with displeasure. “He vanished. And there’s only one thing that could do that.”

“Where’s the prototype?” D inquired, looking up into space.

“Are you listening, Duchess? Where’s the prototype? Also—were you the one who sent U-taker away?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the duchess said, her face hanging in midair.

“What are you smiling about?” Greylancer asked her. “It really was you, wasn’t it? I shall look into that later. Where is the prototype?”

“That remains a mystery. It may well be that the two of them are plotting something very serious.”

“Find them, and be quick about it!”

“Oh, you can leave that to me,” the duchess said, and a split second before fading she smiled.

“That vixen’s plotting something,” Greylancer growled.

But no sooner had the Nobleman said that than a gigantic form surpassing even his suddenly appeared up ahead. “Oh?!” he exclaimed, and in his surprise he was too slow in reaching for his long spear where it lay on the floor.

One of the prototype’s hands gripped a longsword that was most definitely slashing down at the top of Greylancer’s head.

Sparks flew. The blade that’d made a horizontal thrust to lock with the other longsword was in D’s grip. Drawn with ungodly speed, the weapon then went on to pierce the prototype’s chest so rapidly even Greylancer’s eyes couldn’t follow it.

At the same time, crimson sparks erupted in front of the pair. Greylancer’s force field had protected them from a particle beam fired from a weapon in one of their foe’s other hands. However, it also prevented D from counterattacking. The instant his blade flashed out for a second strike, the strange figure standing there melted away into thin air.

“It fled?” Greylancer said, turning to look at D only for an instant. His manly grin skimmed across D’s eyes before fading. “It would seem I’m in your debt now,” the Nobleman continued.

Naturally, there was no reply. Instead, the Hunter said, “Where did it go?”

Greylancer shook his head. "I don't know. Most likely to the same place U-taker went."

"Should we go back to the duchess?"

"I can't control the teleportation device. But do you think she set this all up?"

"Probably. Can you think of any other possibility?"

"Toward what end?"

"The purpose this facility serves," D replied.

"To make a new form of life, one that is neither Noble nor human?"

"Do you have data on humans?"

"Indeed, we do."

"How does that compare to living humans?"

"Well," said Greylancer, "flesh with blood pumping through it would give the very best results."

"One of them vanished from the village above us."

"What?" Greylancer exclaimed, a terrible light in his eyes.

"Apparently you didn't know about that, did you?"

"I swear on the Sacred Ancestor's good name. I knew that human specimens would be the best, and that was what the duchess desired. However, I didn't suspect she'd actually got her hands on—"

"You let your guard down too easily."

"Don't say that," the giant replied, scratching his head. It was such a typically human affectation, it seemed incredibly endearing. "At any rate, let's head back."

The two of them went down the corridor and came to an elevator. Its doors remained closed.

"They won't budge—what's that bitch up to?"

"Now we're the ones who are an obstacle to her."

Greylancer stared at D. The Hunter had struck at the very heart of the matter.

“She has a chance to combine all three species,” D continued. “I doubt she’ll let it go to waste. And we intend to stop that from happening.”

“Wait just a moment. I—” Greylancer protested.

“The prototype was clearly after you. Even if that was of its own volition, the fact that it appeared right in front of you was probably the duchess’s doing.”

“So, she wanted to remove one of her obstacles? Hmm, we’ve known each other for a long time, but I may have worn out my welcome, as the saying goes,” Greylancer said with a grin, rubbing his boulder-like jaw. It was the way someone smiled after drinking something awfully bitter. While perhaps not in the same way as D, the Greater Nobleman had surely lived an intense life. “However, if that’s the case, things become somewhat more complicated. No one but the duchess herself knows each and every nook and cranny of this facility.”

“Do you know the general layout?”

“Yes, more or less.”

“Then show me the way to where the genetic experiments are done.”

“A simple enough request—normally,” Greylancer replied, a world-beating glint in his eye, and a sad smile, wholly unlike his earlier grin, skimming across his lips.

The Nobleman was enjoying this. And he was looking forward to the mountains of corpses and rivers of blood he and D were going to leave in their wake.

“Unit after unit of soldiers from the facility’s slumbering peacekeeping forces will be activated,” he continued. “And there’s no way to reach the laboratory without plowing headlong through the area where they’ll be lying in wait.”

“And you object to with going with me?”

“No, it’s an honor.”

Greylancer swung his long spear. The roaring wind from it tousled D’s hair, but the inhumanly beautiful face it framed wore a smile. It was the sort of smile

to make any who saw want to brag for the rest of their lives that they'd been the one to put it there.

As Greylancer was enraptured, D said to him, "Let's go."

"Okay."

An hour had passed since the others had buried the pair. The world outside was crammed full of rain and darkness.

Is D not coming back? That was the thought that held sway in every mind in the group. But strangely enough, not one of them gave voice to it. For they all knew that his return would be an impossible stroke of luck.

Despite the fact that fear and worry seemed ready to split them open from the inside, a certain kind of quiet and composure hung in the living room. In a manner of speaking, in the face of certain death, they'd had a small taste of hope.

"Quiet, isn't it?" Arbuckle said from where he sat in an armchair, looking at the clock on the wall. Even now it kept time correctly. "A little more than three hours till daybreak. That sure is a long time."

"It'll be here before you know it," Bligh replied.

Josette, who'd been there silently stroking the barrel of her weapon, said, "You're really determined to make it out of here alive, aren't you? Have you got someone waiting for you out there?"

The roughneck nodded. "Yeah, I've got about a hundred favorite gals out there. Ain't you worried about your hubby, lady?"

"Oddly, no."

"Lady, you're a cold one."

"Yes, I'm sure I am," Josette replied, not seeming the least bit angry, and she let her eyes wander through space. "He taught me how to be a warrior at heart. As he used to say, *Don't trust other people. Use anyone, even a child, as a shield. Always stash enough food and weapons for yourself somewhere on the battlefield. If you think you're going to lose, even if everyone around you is*

ready to fight to the death, run for it. You can't fight if you don't survive—all these despicable notions, right? There was only one that I actually liked. Tell yourself you're going to die alone."

Bligh shut his eyes, while Beth gazed intently at Josette's profile from her seat on the sofa. Arbuckle was fidgeting with his pocket watch.

"That's a good thought to keep in mind," Bligh said, his tone like that of a mannequin.

Just then, Beth got up and left the living room. Probably to use the bathroom. She'd been gone less than thirty seconds when a scream pierced the air.

"I'll check it out. Stay here!" Josette cried out, going after her.

Create a disturbance out back, then hit them from the front—a diversionary tactic. At times, the Nobility's strategies were remarkably simple.

Josette soon came back, pushing Beth along as she did.

"It was a bat—a bat-monster!" Beth kept repeating, slumping down on the sofa. "I saw it through the window . . . It was so big . . . like a human with wings . . . Only . . . Only, the face . . . It was Emily!"

Josette wrapped her arms around the girl's trembling form.

II

"Duty calls, Doctor!"

Arbuckle came over, bag in hand. Expertly checking the girl's pulse, he then put his hand against her brow to see if she was feverish.

"No need to worry. She's just in a slight state of shock. I'll give her a shot to relax her. Okay, get that sleeve rolled up."

Pulling a needle and syringe from his bag, Arbuckle filled it with medicine from a bottle, got the air out, and quickly jabbed it into Beth's arm. Beth made a little face when he pulled the needle out again, then pressed a cotton swab soaked in alcohol to the mark it left.

"So, you really were a doctor, weren't you?" Josette said, her tone making it painfully clear how impressed she was.

“Well, after a fashion. I come from a long line of physicians.”

“That crest on your bag—I’ve seen it somewhere before. Oh, that’s right. Sutton Creek, in the southern Frontier. Isn’t that the McCanles family’s—”

“This is just something I won in a card game a long time ago.”

Stowing his things in the bag and shutting the flap, Arbuckle once again took the pulse of Beth, who was lying down. Barely open eyes looked up at him vacantly.

“It’s kind of ironic. You save a girl’s life, but still have to cart her off to hell.” Josette was probably referring to Emily. “Why couldn’t you have stayed a doctor?”

“On account of gambling and drinking—and women,” Bligh said from over by the window.

Arbuckle replied indignantly, “Keep your remarks to yourself, will you?”

“But I’m right on the mark, ain’t I?” he chortled. “A flesh peddler playing at being a doctor is just too damn funny. But if you don’t hurry up and settle on one of the two, you’re gonna find that chasing both brings you to a bad end.”

Anger tinged Arbuckle’s face red. He banged his right wrist against his thigh, and a little concealed gun shot from his shirtsleeve into the palm of his hand. The hammer was cocked.

“Stop!” Josette shouted, but before she’d even finished, both the top and bottom barrels of the little gun belched fire.

At the same time, the window next to Bligh shattered into a million pieces. But not from the pistol’s shots. Those were right on target. They’d gone right through the heart of the winged figure that’d just burst through the windowpane.

“Everyone, down!” Arbuckle shouted, firing a second volley as he dashed toward Beth.

Bligh stood there defiantly with his back to them facing a *thing* that actually had Jan’s face. In fact, it had his body as well. The only thing that’d changed was that he now had wings growing out of his back.

“They’ve undergone some sort of reconstructive surgery!” Arbuckle shouted as he stuffed bullets into his concealed weapon.

Having taken two hits—and with the resulting small-caliber bullet holes in both the right and left sides of its chest—the monster that’d once been Jan still flew effortlessly into the air. But a terrible force then honeycombed his body. When his body dropped to the floor along with mortar and chunks of the ceiling, it looked just like a battered old rag—but it recovered swiftly enough.

“Rest in peace, creep!” Bligh bellowed, charging forward.

Josette’s attack had done no more than halt the demon briefly. Its accursed heart was only a weakness when pierced by the legendary weapon of antiquity. The short spear was driven deep into him, but with an anguish-twisted expression Jan pulled it out again. And Bligh, who still gripped the shaft of it, was sent flying with a single swing of the spear.

“You must’ve missed,” Beth cried as she raced over to where Bligh had smashed into the wall, snatching the short spear from his hands.

Jan turned around. The fingers he held poised before his chest were curved like gaff hooks. He bent his knees, preparing to launch himself into the air once more, but Beth barreled straight at his chest. As Jan arched backward, he spat up blood. The head of the spear had gone right through the middle of his heart and was poking out of his back.

Once Beth stepped away, Jan took hold of the short spear with both hands. Though he put his strength into it, he couldn’t pull it out. Trying to take a breath, Jan only made a sound like the croaking of a frog, then fell face-down on the floor.

“Just as I thought—they were bitten after all,” Bligh said, mopping the sweat from his brow. “Where’s Emily?”

Josette looked all around. Hers was a cold gaze. To her, the cute girl was just someone to be slaughtered now.

“Someone must’ve turned the two of them into servants of the Nobility,” Arbuckle said, putting his hand to his chest.

“Damn it all. Wish they’d just come right at us instead of pulling this

underhanded bullshit. I'd put down the lot of 'em!"

Bligh's shouts bounced off the ceiling and walls before fading away.

A dark sense of fatigue enveloped them all.

As if to shake off the gloom, Josette looked at Beth and said, "You did good, you know." She was referring to the way the girl had destroyed Jan. "Right through the heart with a single thrust—even for pros, that's no easy thing to pull off."

"I wasn't even thinking," Beth replied, trembling from head to toe. Sweat dripped down on her knees like a faint drizzle.

"Hold onto that spear. It might come in handy again." Josette turned her gaze to the world beyond the window, adding, "Sure is a long night, isn't it?"

The sound of the rain swallowed her words.

Beth's head suddenly slumped forward.

Josette had noticed an intense sleepiness sweeping over her. *This is bad. They must be behind this . . .*

Her consciousness swayed wildly. If it gave way, the darkness would ride in. And the Nobility and their servants would be at the reins.

"Can't fall sleep. Just can't."

There was no one there to wake Josette up when she fell to the floor. Both the men were slumped back against the wall, breathing easily in their sleep.

A figure was visible through the windowpane.

Beth got to her feet. A blank look on her face, she seemed like a different person. Going over to the window without a sound, she touched her finger lightly to the lock, undoing it.

In came Emily, accompanied by the sound of the rain.

All three of those abducted by the Nobility had been bitten and made their servants. Beth had probably slain Jan in order to earn the others' trust.

Looking down at their former compatriots, now helpless captives of the sandman, the two girls shared a grin. They were the sort of smiles to make

anyone's hair stand on end.

"Who do you want to feed on?" Emily inquired.

"You can choose first," said Beth. "You've been hard at work out there in the rain. Take your pick. It was unfortunate about your lover, but please don't hold it against me."

"Don't worry about him. When we were human, I had the worst time trying to keep him from cheating on me. Got so depressed I tried to kill myself more than once. Before we were made like this, the thought of being stuck with him disgusted me, but now I'm finally free of him. Are you sure you don't mind me choosing who I want, though?"

Beth nodded in response to Emily's query.

Two pairs of eyes, which at some point had begun to give off blood light, concentrated their gaze on the two men and one woman.

"Well, I really do like my men young," Emily said, licking her lips. No trace remained of the cute sweetheart she'd been before. Now she wore the face of a blood-starved demon.

Quickly squatting down beside Bligh, she pulled back his collar. Tilting his head to one side, she exposed his carotid artery. The sight of the blue blood vessel running beneath his suntanned skin made Emily swallow hard.

When the girl opened her mouth as wide as it would go, the fangs revealed weren't those of a Noble. They belonged to a carnivorous beast. And they seemed suited less for piercing skin and more for tearing through flesh and bone with a single bite.

However, Emily didn't actually get to put her fangs to the test.

It was Beth who first noticed something. A figure in black suddenly loomed beside Emily—and though she couldn't see the face, the rest of him was beautiful enough to enrapture her.

"D?!" Beth groaned in astonishment.

At that moment, Emily turned for a look. And as she turned, her right hand swung around. But not with the strength of a human being. She swung it with

the strength and speed of a vampire. It should've taken off everything on D's head above the temple.

D stood in the very same position, not budging an inch. His right hand went into action. A bloody mist sailed through the air.

Clutching her neck, Emily backed away. Fresh blood gushed from between her fingers.

Beth hurled her short spear. It went through D's heart and stuck in the wall behind him, but the Hunter made another swipe of his blade. Shrieking, Beth jumped back ten feet, the air swirling in her wake as she dashed to the window and made an effortless jump out into the rain, where she vanished.

And Emily was only seconds behind her. However, a rough wooden needle struck her back, piercing her right through the lung. The arc of her leap thrown into disarray, Emily thudded to the ground, but quickly got to her feet again and dashed off.

Crying out with pain and fear, she ran and ran.

When the two women came to the base of the watchtower, they paused to catch their breath. Their stark faces seemed to say, *Could that really be D?*

However, another question seemed plastered over nine-tenths of those faces. Reaching a hand behind her, Emily pulled out the needle that was stuck in her back. Her other hand remained pressed to the wound on her neck. The cut on her neck stopped just shy of the vertebrae, and the needle had narrowly spared her heart, so neither wound had been fatal. However, D's attacks rarely let anyone off that lightly. Emily should've been dead twice over.

"That really was D, wasn't it?" Beth asked. From the top of her head all the way down to her forehead, the rain was pounding against her bloody, exposed brain. Ordinarily, that would've been a fatal wound.

"I'm sure of it. But there was something different about him."

Beth nodded at Emily's reply. Every move she made caused the blood seeping from the top of her head to stain her chest and the ground.

Emily continued, "All our attacks went right through him. And while his sword

wounded us, it didn't manage to destroy us. It was D, but at the same time it wasn't D."

"In which case—"

The two girls looked back the way they'd come—toward the farmhouse where Bligh and the others slumbered.

Turning then toward the east, Emily said, "We've got until it starts getting light over yonder. Just how long should that 'sleep juice' in your blood keep working?"

"A little over three hours," Beth replied.

"That's almost until daybreak. Should be a nice challenge," Emily said, baring her stark fangs in a smile.

Both of them were covered in blood. Their breathing was ragged, too. In a manner of speaking, they were half dead from their wounds. However, when Emily smiled, there was no longer any fear of the gorgeous Vampire Hunter in her.

III

The fire that'd broken out somewhere in the facility and the resulting malfunctions were not major concerns for the duchess. All she'd need to do was to isolate that sector. The Nobility had such science at their disposal that, if they so wished, they could put out a fire as large as a Frontier sector with an extinguisher no larger than the tip of the duchess's little finger. And yet, while the way they had nothing better here for battling the flames than the ancient standbys of water and antiquated foam extinguishers seemed to be taking their love of nostalgia entirely too far, the duchess herself didn't feel that way. She, too, was a member of the Nobility.

"Well, now, I simply must make the Sacred Ancestor's hopes a reality before those two manage to locate me."

The duchess raised her right hand.

The image that appeared in midair was that of the warrior, Lyle Brennan. His eyes were closed. He was unconscious. Having remained behind despite his

wife's wishes, he'd been easy enough for the duchess to abduct.

Two more figures appeared. One was U-taker. The other, the prototype.

Grouping the figures together in midair, the duchess used one hand to carry them to the back of the room. A hitherto-unglimpsed laboratory lay there. The duchess tossed all three of them, and each landed at length on a table. At the same time, machinery that had lain dormant lit up, and innumerable tubes and cords plugged into the trio of bodies.

"The time has finally come to give my blessing to the new fruits of this research. For millennia, I have developed these techniques of reconstruction—nay, of creation—and now I shall use them to bring a new form of life into being." And then the eyes of the fearsome Noblewoman grew dark. "However, my actions run counter to the Sacred Ancestor's orders. That I cannot do. I realize you wish to become something stronger. So I leave the rest to the three of you."

"One thing bothers me," Greylancer said, halting as if he'd just remembered something. Looking back at D, he continued, "The research here always ended in failure. And it was because of that that the duchess descended into madness."

Nothing from the Hunter.

"If it was impossible to succeed in a sane frame of mind, she had no choice but to plunge into the abyss of insanity. Only there would she find the clue that would give rise to a new form of life, she insisted."

"And did she find it?"

"I don't know. To be honest, I'm not even sure whether she returned to her senses, or if even now she wanders a dark world of fears." The Nobleman extended a single finger that was long and thick, yet still seemed gorgeous. "If she can produce some new normal form of life with the secret she obtained, that's no problem. But if it's some twisted, insane thing befitting a world of madness she found, the creatures she creates with it are bound to be misshapen monstrosities. The sort of creatures that would curse the world that

gave them life, scorn it, lay waste to it without any regrets.”

“Like something out of myth?” D said, his voice flowing across the ground, seeping into it.

“Yes. We must find where she is as soon as possible, so that her experiments —” Greylancer stopped there.

D picked up the thread, saying, “Can you stop her?”

A pained look contorted the giant’s features. He immediately gave a vehement shake of his head, saying, “No, I can’t.”

“Then there’s no point in me working with you any longer. Let’s go our separate ways.”

“You say that so easily,” Greylancer replied with a wry grin. “But can you reach her without me to guide you?”

“If this place was constructed at the Sacred Ancestor’s bidding, I should manage.”

Greylancer studied D’s gorgeous features with gleaming eyes, quickly nodded, then said, “Yes, you probably could, at that. Very well then, D. We shall do as you suggest and part company here. Farewell.”

The Nobleman then bowed, and promptly walked off in the direction they’d come.

After watching him go, D started walking in the opposite direction at a brisk pace. Going about thirty feet, he turned and looked back.

The huge figure who was back where he’d started quickly ducked behind a corner. As the Hunter remained looking that way, the giant poked his head out again. When his eyes met D’s, he ducked back again, then came out sheepishly. Apparently the Nobleman had intended to trail along behind him.

The Hunter had no more time to spend with him. This time D started forward at an even faster pace. He immediately came to an elevator. Halting there, he began thinking about something. He didn’t have his left hand.

D closed his eyes. The silent contemplation written on his lovely visage suggested he was listening to the voices of the night winds, or else reflecting on

some fathomless cosmic philosophy.

The color suddenly drained from D's face. Not out of fright. Rather, it was the result of terribly intense concentration. His skin quickly became nearly as clear as glass.

Some forty feet down the corridor, Greylancer poked his head around the corner.

"What's he up to? Just what in the world is he?"

As the Nobleman murmured that, D went into action.

"What's this?!"

The Hunter put his right hand against the elevator doors. They opened effortlessly.

"Wait! I'm getting on!" Greylancer shouted, dashing down the corridor.

The instant the giant form had piled in, the doors shut and the elevator began to move.

D remained standing there like a wrathful deity, his eyes closed. There was no murderous intent about him. However, that was far more unsettling than the instant he drew his sword to square off against someone might've been. Greylancer had probably never had such an uncomfortable ride. But it was over in just five seconds.

Greylancer watched in silence as D stepped out ahead of him. Following after the Hunter and exiting the elevator, the Nobleman unconsciously let a question slip out.

"Where are we?"

And the Nobleman was serious. Though he should've been well acquainted with this bizarre facility, he didn't recognize the spot where they now stood. While in the elevator, his Noble sense of direction—far superior to that of human beings—had told him that they were racing right, then zooming left, then rising and falling diagonally over and over without rhyme or reason until ultimately, and impossibly, spinning in circles.

"Even the duchess doesn't know about this. This is one very, very dangerous

individual,” Greylancer murmured to himself. The way he then grinned was truly in character for the Nobleman.

Just six feet up ahead, D turned right at the corner. When the Nobleman followed suit just a few seconds later, crimson flashes shot by him on all sides. Particle beams. One of them bored through Greylancer’s chest.

Not showing a hint of pain, he raised his long spear up over his head. The beams all converged on the lengthy head of the weapon.

In a few seconds, the firing stopped.

“This is what put the ‘lance’ in ‘Greylancer’—now watch what it can do.”

He struck his long spear against the floor. Dozens of streaks of light shot from the head of it, tracing in reverse the paths they’d previously taken, headed back toward the launchers. Fireballs erupted from the walls and ceiling, spreading with ferocious speed as Greylancer followed after D. For the gorgeous young man had walked away without a baptism of crimson beams.

The Nobleman came to a spot where the corridor branched off in five directions.

“Now, which way should I go?”

The indications of a violent conflict came from the farthest of the corridors.

“This seems promising.”

Muttering to himself that he hoped there’d be no further beam attacks, Greylancer dashed on.

Turning the corner, he found D matching steel with multiple foes a dozen yards away. They were probably the peacekeeping forces for this sector. The men wore green uniforms the likes of which even Greylancer had never seen before, and were armed with spears and shields. Their movements were strangely sharp and quick, and they seemed to be giving D trouble.

However, the noted Noble warrior was left bugging his eyes. Every time D’s sword flashed out, members of the peacekeeping force were slain. Nine of them encircled the Hunter completely, spinning their spears to distract D and attacking at staggered intervals in an attempt to drive him into a corner. Given

the length of their spears compared to his sword, their attacks left them at a definite advantage, and from what Greylancer saw, they were quite skilled.

D disregarded all of them. They didn't even bother him. D didn't move a single step from where he was—or even a fraction of an inch, for that matter, and he seemed to be swinging his blade without any particular plan.

This shouldn't have been happening. The spearmen were supposedly striking from beyond the reach of the Hunter's sword. And yet they were slain, one after another. Those who charged in, those who leapt into the air—naturally they would be cut down, but when those out at a safe distance were laid low in fresh blood, Greylancer thought it had to be some sort of miracle caused by a kind of magic unknown even to the Nobleman.

“H-he can cut down foes beyond the reach of his blade?!” Greylancer cried out in amazement.



Perhaps overhearing him, three of the surviving members turned toward the Nobleman. All the laser beams fired from the devices on their chests were absorbed by Greylancer's long spear. One of the peacekeepers raced forward and hurled his spear. It was traveling faster than sound.. Faster than a bullet. With a light swing of his long spear, Greylancer sent it flying back.

Following the exact same course, the spear pierced the heart of the one who'd first hurled it. He was knocked back thirty feet, where he fell to the floor. His whole body turned into liquid, spreading out in all directions. He was an artificial human.

In the seconds that battle took, the other two charged to attack. Spears struck at his chest and face simultaneously, but Greylancer countered them with his speed. Parrying both at once, he arced his long spear around at the same time. Or rather, he spun it like a vortex. Though his two foes tried to release their spears, the weapons wouldn't leave their hands.

The vortex spun at speeds more intense than living flesh could bear. Before even a full rotation was complete, the peacekeepers' bodies had been broken down into bizarre flesh and organs. The parts spun with the vortex, and when Greylancer stopped his long spear, they hit the floor with tremendous force.

Gazing with disgust at the liquid spreading across the floor, Greylancer turned then to look over at D. The Hunter was already walking away. All that remained at the site of his battle were puddles.

"The way he's going, it doesn't look like I'll ever be a match for him," the Nobleman said, whipping his cape around and following after the Hunter.

The duchess was bound to have better defenses than this. What other manner of foes would stand in their way? Curiosity and excitement about those unknown challenges made the Greater Nobleman feverish from head to toe.

A dozen yards ahead of Greylancer, D continued his advance. Without warning, his footing gave way. The passageway beneath his feet had sunk. D fell.

Not only that, but the gigantic form of Greylancer also fell through the air.

He'd watched as the walls and ceiling had crumbled like spun glass. Below, he could see water baring its white fangs.

Is that the sea?

Since ancient times, the tales had been spread: vampires feared running water, and, once in it, they wouldn't surface again. And now hunter and hunted plummeted like rocks toward the eddying waters of that impossible, distant sea.

The Birth Of A New Species

chapter 8

I

In the living room of the farmhouse, the tension was congealing into a jet-black mass. The sound of the driving rain seemed to send a miasma into the air.

“Two hours to go,” Arbuckle said, putting his pocket watch away and beginning to use his knife to sharpen a wooden stake he’d scrounged somewhere. “What about Jan’s corpse?” he asked. He wasn’t talking about its location.

“I went and had a look at him,” Josette replied from the back door, which she’d just come through. “No problem there. There’s never been a case of a vampire run through the heart coming back to life.”

“Now, we don’t know about that,” Arbuckle countered, brushing off the wood shavings that’d collected in his lap. “The monsters here in this village are somehow different from the ones we all know. Who’s to say the servants of the Nobility are exceptions to that?”

“I really don’t like the sound of that,” Bligh said, abandoning his surveillance from the window and getting to his feet. “Think I’ll have a peek at him, too.”

Once he’d vanished through the doorway, Josette glared at Arbuckle and then, after hesitating for a moment, followed after Bligh.

Jan’s corpse lay in the middle of the floor. Checking him for a pulse and making sure he wasn’t breathing, Bligh gave a stiff smile and said, “Looks like

we're okay here."

Pulling a crumpled paper package from his pocket, Bligh took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Those aren't very good for your health."

"What are you, a schoolmarm?"

Expelling smoke, Bligh stared at the warrior's wife. Josette didn't avert her gaze. She stared right back at Bligh until he became uncomfortable, then asked, "So, where were you headed?"

"A village not far from here. It's called Angyoh. Know it?"

"No."

"Didn't think so."

"Why? If you don't mind me asking, that is."

"I know somebody there. Have something to deliver."

"You don't say."

"Ain't you worried about your hubby?" Bligh asked, his query mainly intended to try to take her off edge.

"Even if I were, it wouldn't matter, would it?"

"Lady, you're a lousy liar."

The woman arched an eyebrow quizzically.

"You're so worried about him you can barely stand it," he continued. "Hell, it's written all over your face. But it's about time you gave up on him."

"I know. So kindly drop it, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Bligh replied, taking another drag on his cigarette.

"We'd better not let our guard down," said the woman. "The two of them out there have the strength and cunning of the Nobility."

"Yeah, I know that. But we've done all we can do, too. Mock Nobility or not, they won't be so quick to come at us."

“I hope you’re right,” Josette said, her reply not entirely free of fear. “The vampires in this village are a little different.”

Bligh smiled and said, “Well, we’ll manage somehow. One way or another, I’m gonna stay alive and make it outta the village. And you and the flesh peddler are coming with me.”

“You’re pretty confident of that.”

“Yeah. Just leave it to me.”

“Can’t believe it,” Josette murmured weakly.

“What do you mean? I ain’t lying!”

“No, it’s nothing,” Josette said elusively, her previous cryptic remark spurred by how different from her husband she found Bligh to be.

Through all their days of trying battle, not once had Josette’s husband tried to protect her. He only charged in to help her in accordance with pre-made plans. Even then, when things got out of control, Brennan left it to Josette to handle them. He’d left her behind. The only thing that’d saved Josette from fearsome servants of the Nobility or death at the hands of wanted men was her own luck and skill. Traveling with a husband who didn’t care whether his wife lived or died, Josette had felt her heart become a vast and barren wasteland. But now that was at an end. It’d been stopped by words like *just leave it to me* and *coming with me*.

“Hey,” Bligh said, wearing an expression of amazement, “are you crying?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Josette replied, batting her eyes and shaking her head. “At any rate, let’s hang tough until daybreak.”

“Yeah. Ain’t no telling where those bastards will try hitting us.”

That unpredictable pair was up in a watchtower only a hundred yards from the farmhouse. They were more than sixty feet off the ground. Wind and rain lashed at them head-on. They looked at a window with light spilling from it.

“Since their outer defenses are strong, we’ll just have to topple them from within,” Emily said, gnashing her trenchant fangs.

Beth remained silent, gazing at her compatriot.

“But we’re a new type, right? Last time didn’t work out, but now we can do this!”

Emily pursed her lips. What escaped them wasn’t a whistle. It was a thin tube that was red, as if choked with blood. The tip of it tapered like a needle, and taking it in hand, Emily rested her chin on the railing surrounding the watchtower. Her breath hissed out. And with it, her tongue stretched. Shaken all the while by the wind and rain that hammered them, at first glance it looked weak, but with the strength of a steel cable it kept stretching farther and farther.

It was about a hundred yards to the farmhouse. Easily stretching that far, the tongue started to descend, bound for a chimney.

“You know their location?” Beth asked.

Soaking wet and with eyes closed, Emily didn’t reply, but after about five minutes she finally said, “Found them.”

Her eyes opened. They gave off a glow the same color as blood.

There was only a single chimney, but it was connected to every fireplace in the house to rid them of their smoke. Probing it, she’d found something.

“Two of them were in there, but they left,” said Emily. For she had an eye at the tip of her tongue. It must’ve been some sort of sensory organ.

“Here we come, Jan!” Beth exclaimed, an evil smile spreading across her face. A flash of lightning bleached it white. “We’ll give you the life of a Noble once again.”

The thin red tube crept from the ancient stonework of the fireplace. The way it wriggled over to Jan’s corpse without hesitation called to mind a snake. Stopping by the right side of his head, it reared up like a striking serpent, then plunged right into Jan’s heart. The red, blood-like liquid coursed through the tube.

As Josette had stated, vampires who’d been run through the heart didn’t

come back to life again. But look. Was a healthy hue not slowly creeping into his pale flesh? His heart wasn't beating. Yet the crimson fluid flowed through Jan's veins, and his fingers began to close tightly. Even a vampire would've found this an unearthly world of strutting monsters.

The duchess was pleased with her success. Two of her obstacles had vanished into watery graves in the "artificial sea," which meant there was no longer anyone to impede her ambitions.

An hour had passed—and she'd already begun creating the new life form. Based on all the data accumulated up until now, the operation proceeded so smoothly it surprised even her, with only one procedure remaining before her aims had been met.

In the control sphere for this experimental facility that was the pinnacle of "Noble science," the duchess stared down with irony at the rusty lever by her hand. The final pull that would determine the results of so many experiments would come from this old-fashioned iron lever. And somewhere in her heart, the Noblewoman was able to take a cold view of that anachronism.

In the center of the laboratory there stretched a vast pool that looked large enough to house more than a hundred sharks. Blue-green water spread farther than the eye could see, foaming, and bubbles roiled to the surface. The control sphere suddenly floated into the air. Soundlessly gliding through space thanks to its gravity field propulsion system, it halted in midair at the point indicated by the numerical data—the center of the enormous pool. The trappings of a laboratory were nowhere to be seen.

By means unknown, the pitch-black sky was split by the starkness of lightning. The duchess ran her eyes over the figures. Each and every value was perfectly correct. She felt satisfaction and confidence—and a touch of apprehension.

Two of the figures were off by one quadrillionth. The computer said that was due to the genetic fusion. However, it also stated that such a tiny discrepancy wouldn't be a problem.

The figures for the DNA fusion process are being distorted. Was the mysterious equation wrong? No, that can't be.

The duchess's right hand reached for the final lever.

"Go!"

Just as she was about to throw the lever, there was a change to the diagram above her head.

Intruder alert! it declared.

A blue ball of light shot up from the water, swallowing the control sphere. The control sphere creaked under the fierce molecular impact.

"Who dares?" the duchess groaned, but even then she knew the answer.

From the bottom of the sphere, a silvery mass about six and a half feet long dropped into the water. Once underwater, it took on the most effective shape for propulsion, going on the attack in a tenth of a second. The bluish-green expanse gave rise to a dome of light about thirty feet in diameter. Its color deepened by the second, and it swelled larger and larger.

The control sphere had risen to an altitude of fifteen hundred feet, and within it the duchess sensed that her counterattack had ended fruitlessly. There was no numerical data. Her own Noble instincts told her so. The light that'd colored the control sphere's field of view for an instant was already gone.

"You realize all this kicking and screaming is no use. You are—"

Having the control sphere drop down to just shy of the bubbling surface of the water, the duchess switched the numerical display over to directional readings. There was no need to do so.

A supple figure was coming disinterestedly across the water's surface straight toward the sphere. Boots ankle-deep in the water, he showed no hesitation in his strides. Lightning made his face blaze from the darkness.

The duchess's features warped with rapture.

"—D."

II

Precisely. It was D. The young man had supposedly fallen from the crumbling passageway and disappeared into the choppy sea below, but now he moved

eerily across the sea's surface, halting about ten yards from Heldarling.

Her breathing now ragged for some reason, the duchess said, "D! What are you doing here?"

"I fell into the sea," D replied. "And there was someone else with me. He had a compact bathysphere with him."

"Greylancer—and was he responsible for that missile a moment ago as well? That miserable traitor."

"Rather than curse him, you should be cursing yourself for dropping me into a sea that connected back here."

The duchess looked as if a wave had washed across her face. "Oh, I see. It would seem I've underestimated your abilities. Wait. I shall summon an appropriate opponent for you now."

At that instant, a crimson beam shot from the blue-green water. Penetrating the control sphere's force field with ease, it unleashed its full power. The white-hot flow of energy spread across the water's surface, engulfing D in the blink of an eye.

In no time, the flashes of lightning brought the lonely surface of the water out in relief, like a challenge thrown at eternity. There was no one there. But look. In one spot, the surface of the water had begun to bubble. A wind arose. Waves formed, their crests torn by the wind. Wasn't that the way this planet had been in the distant past? Lightning struck the surface of the water, which even now hadn't ceased bubbling, ions were released, and steam billowed up to hide even the crests of the waves.

Watch. From beneath the madly beating waves, a new form was rising eerily. The light died. It was as if it were afraid to illuminate that form. A *thing* stood on the water's surface.

Leaving Bligh and Arbuckle on watch in the living room, Josette did a loop through the rest of the farmhouse once more. Making sure all the doors and

windows were locked, she was just about to head back to the living room when there was a faint sound in the next room. Apparently a piece of furniture had moved. However, there was nothing in there but Jan's corpse. Sliding the minigun's firing mechanism into her left hand, Josette used her right to draw the short spear she had tucked through the back of her belt.

She turned the doorknob with the same hand that held the firing button. Pushing the door open as she turned the knob, she flashed in the light that was mounted on her minigun. A wind struck her cheek.

No one was there. And Jan's corpse? It was gone. The circle of light illuminated naught save the lonely wooden floor.

Josette trained the light on the window. It was open. Wind and rain were blustering in.

Though she'd had no intention of entering the room, the thought that she had to shut that window got her moving first. She practically ran over to the window. Once she'd locked it, relief bubbled up in her. For a split second she let the tension escape her, and then her body was squeezed from behind with vise-like strength. Something warm latched on to the nape of her neck.

Josette shifted the barrel of the minigun ever so slightly, then hit the firing button. The barrel had been pointed backward to deal with the attack from behind, and now it showered her foe with long-awaited gunfire. The vice-like grip loosened, and then was torn free.

Making a broad turn purely on instinct, Josette let her short spear fly. Having taken the barrage, Jan's body had nearly been cut in two above the waist. The spear went right through his heart. The force of the impact nailed his upper body to the wall, and his lower half tore free and fell to the floor. When she saw it stagger back to its feet, Josette let out a cry that was almost a shriek and started firing the minigun indiscriminately. Even after her target was reduced to a bloody mist, even after the minigun had run out of ammo, the woman still held down the firing button.

It was Bligh that finally stopped her, saying, "Simmer down. What happened?"

"Jan came back to life!"

“You’ve gotta be joking.”

Looking over at the wall, Bligh started toward where Jan’s upper body hung.

“One shot, right through the ticker,” the man noted. “Shouldn’t be a problem now.”

“If it’s happened twice, it can happen a third time. Cut his head off.”

“Okay. You oughta head back to the living room.”

“No, I have to see it for myself.”

When Bligh came back with a machete in his hand, Josette said to him, “I think you might’ve noticed this already.”

With that, she took away the hand she’d had pressed to her neck. A pair of teeth marks had been left over the carotid artery.

Bligh’s eyes went wide. Instinctively, he backed away, but that reaction was unavoidable.

“Jan bit you, but he’s been destroyed. His teeth marks should’ve disappeared! You sure it wasn’t Beth or Emily?”

“It was Jan,” Josette replied wearily. “There really is something different about the Nobility around here—they’re a new type. So their victims must be, too.”

“What should we do?”

“Kill me—at least, that’s what I should tell you, but I’ll try everything else first. We’ve got a fire going, don’t we?”

“Yeah.”

The two of them went back to the living room.

There was no sign of Arbuckle. The window was open.

“Where the hell’s he gone?” Bligh exclaimed, looking around wildly.

“Got attacked, most likely. Forget about him. It might just be they’re all here in the house.”

“Oh, that’d be fun.”

After a world-beating grin, Bligh gave Josette a worried look.

She said to him, “Vampires who come back from the dead after being stabbed through the heart, Nobility whose victims still turn into vampires even after the Noble responsible has been destroyed—there’s bound to be real trouble if we don’t take care of Beth and Emily. If they get out of the village and start feeding on humans, there’ll be no stopping them at that point. We have to slay them here. Here I was, ready to finish myself off, but I guess I’ll have to put that off until later.”

“Wh-what the hell am I supposed to do about you?” Bligh stammered.

“For the time being, patch me up. After that, if you see me acting even the slightest bit strange, go right ahead and run me through the heart and chop off my head.”

Bligh could only stare at Josette dismally after the outlandish thing she’d just said. However, a mysterious glint had filled his eyes. It was an emotion he’d long forgotten—respect.

Josette turned herself around and went over to the heater. Taking the tongs from beside the fireplace and pulling a piece of coal from the box beside it, she placed the black nugget in the fire. The coal immediately started to glow.

“Hey!” Bligh shouted at her. Just then, the warrior woman pressed the blazing lump against her neck.

Bligh raced over, but before he could pull the tongs and coal away, Josette dropped to one knee on the floor. She must’ve had a frightening amount of mental and physical fortitude to withstand the pain so well.

Though Bligh crinkled his brow at the stench of burning flesh, the emotion that’d taken root in his chest only grew stronger, like a rock upon which waves would break futilely. Reaching out his hand like it was the most natural thing in the world, he put his arm around Josette’s shoulders and slowly helped her to her feet, then led her over to the sofa.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. But, you know, I’ve heard about this treatment of yours, too. Unless you sprinkle the magic water on the wound you seared, all you wind up with is a bad burn!”

“Still, it’ll buy me about two hours,” Josette retorted. “After that—well, you know what I need you to do.”

“Oh, you delegating responsibility now? Yeah, I’m okay with that.”

Josette placed her hand on top of the one the man had resting on her shoulder.

From the front hall, a voice that sounded like it’d been starved of oxygen for ten millennia said, “No, leave everything to me.”

The eyes of the pair came to focus on a spot where Arbuckle stood.

“Keep back, you son of a bitch!” Bligh snarled, short spear at the ready.

There was no way a man who’d disappeared with a pair of vampiresses was still normal.

“I wish I could tell you I’m fine, but they got me,” Arbuckle said, showing them the back of his right hand.

Josette took one look at it, then shut her eyes.

“Well, damnation,” Bligh growled. “Now I’ve gotta put you down, too? What about the two girls?”

“Before I knew it, there were two pairs of bright red eyes outside the window. By the time I realized it was *their* eyes, I was already outside.”

Fortunately for Arbuckle, the torrential downpour had left Beth and Emily’s hypnotic powers weakened, and it was probably on account of that that the old procurer was able to bring along the doll D had given them. Returning to his senses the instant the rain struck him, Arbuckle had thrown D’s doll at the pair just as they were about to pounce on him. The doll had swung its sword and nearly taken off Emily’s head, but Beth had dodged the blade and sunk her fangs into Arbuckle’s right hand.

“So, then you killed ’em?” asked Bligh.

Arbuckle nodded, adding, “Not me, but D’s proxy. We’ve got nothing more to fear. Well, nothing but me and Josette, that is.”

“Damn it all!” Bligh exclaimed, backing a safe distance away from the two of them and keeping his short spear at the ready.

“Relax. We’re still okay. I have magic water with me. If I were to press a burning coal to my neck it’d probably kill me, but Josette will survive. Sprinkle this on her.” Arbuckle pulled a slim whiskey flask like travelers favored from the inner pocket of his jacket and tossed it to Bligh.

Eyeing it skeptically, Bligh asked Josette, “What should I do?”

“Try putting some on me.”

“But on top of that burn—you sure it’s okay?”

In the past, tens of thousands of different spells or drugs had been devised to prevent someone from turning into a Noble, but all had proved fruitless. The only exception was a method that’d been discovered only two short years earlier, which consisted of burning the wound and then purifying it with magic water. But the combination of the two was so painful, it sometimes drove people to madness. Most women and children would die from the shock, or else lose their minds. The magic water couldn’t be mass produced, and its existence wasn’t common knowledge yet.

“Seems pretty damn risky. The guy admits to being a vampire!” Bligh said, riddled with anxiety.

Josette smiled at him and extended her right hand. Once she’d taken the flask and unscrewed the lid, Bligh went over to Arbuckle and jammed the tip of his spear against the man’s throat.

“If anything strange happens to her, you’re gonna wish you’d never been born!”

“Don’t worry,” the man reassured him. “I’m still human.”

The pair’s exchange was punctuated by a scream.

Josette had performed the final treatment. White smoke rose from beneath her left hand, which was pressed to the nape of her neck.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

She let out a long wail of pain. It grew thin and hoarse, and then Josette slumped across the sofa.

III

Bligh raced over, brushed aside the woman’s hand, and looked at the additional burns.

“You son of a bitch!” he snarled, but when he whipped around, Arbuckle had suddenly vanished.

“Oh shit,” Bligh said his eyes leaping to every corner of the room as he slapped Josette on the cheek. When she opened her eyes, he let out a sigh of joy and relief.

“You okay?”

“I’ll survive.”

Her voice was steady. Her complexion was like that of a corpse. Warrior training or not, she was still just a woman of flesh and blood. Her strength was rapidly fading.

“Two hours more,” Bligh said, swallowing the words, *Think you can last that long?* He fell silent, but quickly said, “All right.”

“What’s going on?” Josette inquired dubiously.

“I’m going up to the castle.”

“Huh?” Josette said, so surprised she tried to sit up, but immediately slumped back again.

“It’s all the fault of the folks up in the castle you wound up like this. They must’ve come up with some way of helping you.”

“What are you talking about? You’ll never make it back alive!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. After all, D’s up there, too!”

“But there’s no guarantee you’ll run into him!”

“But if I stay here doing nothing, you ain’t gonna last till daybreak! Okay, just

hear me out. Get down in the basement. Down there, all you've gotta do is shut one door and they ain't gonna be able to get in. Just wait for me there."

"A basement? How do you know the place's got one?"

"Earlier, when I was in Jan's room, the carpet on the floor slid to one side and I saw a trapdoor."

"I see. But you're—"

"Hey, don't worry about me," Bligh said, the pain that'd rapidly risen in his heart written all over his face. "I had me a lady and I couldn't save her. I'll be damned if I'm gonna feel that way ever again."

Before Josette could think of anything else to say, powerful arms looped around her back and behind her knees, easily scooping her up.

The *thing* that floated up was greeted by fog and waves and lightning. Aside from its strangely beefy chest—which was actually like a boulder covered in black skin—the rest of its body was exquisitely proportioned. Though its small face and head were also colored jet black, beads of water slid across the surface of arms and legs the same hue that weren't the least bit monstrous, but rather as limber and muscular as those of an athlete.

"Both U-taker and the prototype are gone," the *thing* said, the words issuing from its black mouth. "Their flesh and blood have become my body. Now to venture outside and make the world tremble. The strong will soon gather beneath my banner. Better yet, I can remain alone and do away with the remaining Nobility."

He began to walk across the water with confident strides. Surely he never could've imagined that another figure would appear with a burst of bubbles from the water's surface twenty to twenty-five feet ahead of him.

It was a giant who stood a head taller than the *thing* but was only half as wide, and in his hand he held a crimson long spear.

"Greylancer, you yet live?"

The giant laughed aloud, saying, "D survived. So I had to, too."

“I am not meant to face you. Will you not join forces with me?”

“Join forces to do what exactly?”

“Dismantle the world, and build a new one in its place.”

“Together?” Greylancer sneered. “Besides, once all the humans and Nobility have been disposed of, there won’t be anything left of the world. What are you and I supposed to do, spend our golden years playing cat’s cradle or throwing javelins together?”

“Once all life on this planet is extinct, we need only go to another planet. And do the same thing there.”

“So, we’d be berserkers? Are you what the Sacred Ancestor was trying to create?” Greylancer said, his eyes giving off an angry blood light.

“Precisely,” the *thing* replied, thumping its chest. “That is what I was born for. U-taker and the prototype have become my flesh. They’re somewhere inside of me. And they work toward the same purpose.”

“Rubbish,” Greylancer spat, looking toward the heavens. “Duchess, are you listening? With one pull of a lever, you’ve created this misguided individual. Is that what you desired? Was this the Sacred Ancestor’s dream? Nay, I say it is neither.”

The *thing* blinked its black eyes. Every inch of Greylancer was enveloped by hellfire. That was the will of a Greater Noble.

“When you were born in these black waters, you made a mistake somewhere. Was it your human blood, your Noble mind, or your OSB flesh? You’re out of your mind. And accordingly, I shall do away with you in the name of the Sacred Ancestor.”

Down around Greylancer’s feet, the black water began swirling. The long spear rose. A thin dribble of water linked the spearhead to the surface of the water. Suddenly, the water twisted, becoming a drill more than three feet in diameter that pierced the upper body of the *thing*. No, the three-foot-wide drill actually ripped the *thing* in two.

Even after the water drill had vanished, the *thing* still didn’t fall. For a string of

blood thinner than any thread connected its two halves. That one string quickly became two, became ten, a thousand, ten thousand strings knitting together a body.

“I suspected that might happen,” said Greylancer. Of course, he was fully aware this was not only a formidable foe but an incredible one. Still, the giant was above that, the daring and self-confidence never leaving his face. For this man was renowned as “a Noble among Nobles.”

The head of the long spear began to turn red. The water gave rise to waves, their crests white and fractured. From the wind.

“Ah, it’s been so long since it flowed through me. The power of this planet—nay, that of Mars, Venus, Jupiter, perhaps the entire Milky Way. One wave of my lance was enough to repel an entire OSB fleet, and now you shall taste its might.”

And as the Nobleman spoke, a flash of light linked the long spear and the *thing*. Heaven and earth alike turned stark white.

From the depths of the light, a voice was heard to say, “It’s no use, Greylancer. Just as you can wield the power of the Milky Way, I have been given the power to destroy the same galaxy. And now I use it to absorb power. Pour more into me. Make it hotter and more intense. All of it becomes my power. See, it’s more than enough.”

The light still linked the two of them. Greylancer shook. For he had felt the blistering energy pouring into every inch of his body.

“You’re sending it all back at me? I should expect no less,” said the Nobleman.

At that moment, astronomical observatories and stellar research facilities around the world noted a sudden drain of energy from the Milky Way that threw them into a panic. And just as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped.

The *thing* had spread the fingers of its right hand and held its palm out high before Greylancer’s watchful eyes. What was that inscribed in the gleaming gold of the object it held?

“The crest of the Sacred Ancestor?!” Greylancer exclaimed in astonishment, backing away. “The king of the Nobility—the Absolute Ruler. Why would you

have that?”

“Would you defy me, Greylancer? Any who bear this crest are to be afforded the same respect as the Sacred Ancestor—it’s the ironclad rule, the very first line of the Law of the Nobility. I am the Sacred Ancestor!” The fierce voice raced across the surface of the water like a storm across the seas, declaring, “Stand down, Greylancer.”

At the same time, another voice, quiet and gorgeous, said, “Stand down, *imposter*.”

Before the location of the second speaker could even be discerned, the surface of the water between the two of them split. Leaping from it was a young man of unearthly beauty garbed in black, and he had a longsword raised to strike. His blade, which had cleaved wind and wave, came down, splitting the *thing* from the top of its head all the way down to its crotch.

The *thing*’s expressionless face twisted into a smirk. After D’s blade had passed completely through it, not even the line of his cut still remained. Who was this, who had rendered Greylancer’s long spear useless, and now deflected D’s unholy blade?

“You absolutely, positively cannot cut me. Only one who could cut the Sacred Ancestor can cut me down.”

The *thing* arched backward and laughed. Bending down, it stuck its right hand into the water, then slowly raised it. Here was something D would undoubtedly recognize. What appeared from the black water was a sword belonging to the warrior Lyle Brennan.

D said, “Human, Noble, and OSB—in a way, I suppose you have accomplished what *he* planned.”

In some ways, Greylancer was more astonished as he looked at the young man before him than he’d been when he saw the crest of the Sacred Ancestor. Who did D mean by *he*? This Hunter couldn’t possibly be—?

“What did you say just now?” the *thing* inquired, thrusting its right hand straight at D. For the same surprise had seared its body. “Who do you mean when you say *he*? You couldn’t possibly mean—the Sacred Ancestor?”

“No one can say,” D replied. His voice was as beautiful as his features. “No one knows if his plans were correct, or if the results were right. Not the humans, not the Nobility, not the OSB, not even he himself.”

“Don’t say that!” the *thing* with Brennan’s voice cried, making a horizontal slash with its blade.

Still poised to deftly parry it, D sailed backward. When he landed, the *thing* closed on him. The sword he brought down like a man possessed left D shrouded in bluish sparks.

“All that parrying does nothing to slay me! D, only one in the image of the Sacred Ancestor can wound me.”

The *thing* with Brennan’s voice left a cut on D’s brow with his blade. The blood that dripped down from it touched D’s lips. His deep, dark eyes gave off blood light.

What are you, D? Where do you come from, and where are you going?

The figure in black leapt. As the Hunter brought his blade down from directly overhead, the *thing* shouted, “Look!” and thrust out his right hand.

The sound of bone being cut traveled across the surface of the water. The *thing’s* right wrist rose higher and higher, coming down in the water far off in the distance.

D ran without making a sound.

His wrist still gushing bright blood, the *thing* that spoke as Brennan prepared to stand against him. Even now, his confidence in his own immortality was unshaken.

There was an acute pain at the back of his head. Something had been pulled out of it! And now the energy that could control the galaxy was leaking out from the same spot!

“Now!” a hoarse voice shouted, its cry spreading as the sea surged and snarled.

The sword the *thing* had raised to parry the blow broke like it was a slip of paper, and his head was split down to the jaw. His whole body blurred by a

bloody mist, the *thing* fell flat on his back, sending up splashes of water.

Several minutes later, D and Greylancer encountered someone unexpected in the center of the laboratory. It was Bligh, blood-soaked and covered with wounds from head to toe, and riding on his shoulder was the Hunter's left hand.

The hand turned its palm toward D and said hello. "I'll have you know," it continued, "that it was yours truly that drove a four-inch-long needle into the back of that bastard's head while he was being upgraded! And me that latched onto him and yanked it out again, too."

"He was the one who threw you," D said, turning his gaze to Bligh.

"It was most fortunate the two of you ran into each other," Greylancer said, making no attempt to hide his incredulity.

"Well, I went down in the elevator and was kinda wandering around when these weird monsters jumped me. Thought I was a goner, but just then this thing dropped down from the ceiling and saved me. Never thought I'd owe my life to a severed hand. But enough about that—"

Bligh went on to tell them what'd happened to Josette, and asked about a cure.

"That won't be a problem. I got all the info from the computers about the abilities of the things they made here," the left hand assured them.

Following its directions, the group prepared medicine and dashed back to the farmhouse, but what they found in the basement were the bodies of Arbuckle and Josette, dead by each other's hands. The man had taken a short spear through the heart, while the woman's neck had been torn halfway through by sharp claws.

"The bastard must've snuck down there before Josette went in," Bligh said, sounding like he could hardly bear it. For it was Arbuckle who'd given Josette the "magic water."

"You die alone, eh?" he murmured.

Those had been Josette's words.

Looking out the window, Greylancer said, "It would appear the rain has let up, too."

The patter of raindrops had died away, and a watery blue light had begun to fill the eastern sky.

"I guess it's about time for me to leave," Greylancer said, looking at the others and giving D a grin. "A long, long time ago, a human girl taught me a saying. I'm not exactly sure if this is the sort of time to use it, though."

"How did it go?" asked D.



“You only go around once, they say. Apparently it means sometimes, you never meet again,” Greylander replied, his gigantic form gradually becoming transparent. “I suppose you already know this, but both I and the duchess are illusions temporarily given physical form from data recorded in the computers. But what a pleasant time I’ve had, D. I’ve gone across time and met an incredible man.”

“Godspeed to you,” said the left hand. D only gave a faint nod.

The Noble among Nobles faded away.

The others went outside.

“What the hell?!” Bligh alone exclaimed. “The village—it’s all rotting away. It’s like the ruins of a place from a thousand years ago.”

The farmhouses had collapsed, only the pillars of the watchtower still stood, and all that was left of the river that’d flowed there was a dry bed.

“When the dreams of the Nobility rotted away, that was the end of everything,” the hoarse voice said in a tone that carried an appreciable sense of pointlessness.

“So, everything is just a dream?” D said, somewhat uncharacteristically.

“That’s right. Some might ask if we’re not just a dream, too.”

His left hand had a ring of indefinable sadness to it.\

By the time they’d buried Josette’s remains and exited the village, it was nearly noon. Taking the highway west, they came to a tiny village where Bligh halted his cyborg horse and said, “This is the place. So long.”

“Where are you going?” the left hand inquired, apparently more interested in other people’s doings than D was.

“The grave of a woman I left behind when I ran off, actually.”

“Oh, you don’t say.”

Just three years earlier, Bligh had gotten caught up in some trouble gambling in a nearby village and found himself on the run from the local thugs. Though he'd fled with the female gambler he was working with, it was here that their pursuers had caught up to them. Driven by fear, he'd left the woman behind and fled alone, having no news of her after that.

"So now it's bugging you after all this time, and you're gonna bring her a flower?" said the hoarse voice. "You're a sad individual."

"Say what you like. So long!"

Bligh hitched his steed to a nearby sapling, then walked east from the highway down a narrow side street. Halting after fifteen or twenty feet, he found cobblestones piled by the side of the street. There were two small graves. Pulling a single bloom of infinity weed from the inner pocket of his jacket, he placed it before the graves. It was a nice white flower.

D probably understood why there were two graves.

The man lingered at the graves for quite a while, and by the time he turned around, the Hunter had already wheeled his steed around and headed west.

End

Postscript

As I've mentioned in the past, I've traveled to Transylvania twice. The first time was on my own dime. The second was for a television program. As we traveled by van, what caught my eye in the ever-changing scenery outside the windows were the little villages. That was the basis for the setting of this Vampire Hunter D tale.

Isn't a village in a foreign land in itself enough to form a fantasy? When you think about it, fantasy is basically rooted in the tales of the forests, streams, and mountains at the edge of civilization. I suppose this Vampire Hunter D story continues that tradition.

D's tale is based in fantasy and Westerns. While both genres are set out on a frontier, they're still like oil and water. The Western, with its setting in dusty, wind-whipped badlands, is a far cry from the haunted forests and lakes that form the cornerstone of fantasy. It would be strange to find a gunfighter with a pair of six-shooters stuffed in his belt wandering through a deep forest. In a movie it would be jarring, but fortunately a novel can make it work. D is someone who walks in two worlds—a knight from a foreign land, in a manner of speaking. The setting may be a tiny village, but it could hide cosmic secrets. I hope you'll enjoy that aspect of the book.

An August day, 2010

While watching *Higanjima* (2010) Hideyuki Kikuchi

And now, a preview of the next book in the
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 28

THE TIGER IN WINTER

Written by
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Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming 2018 from Dark Horse Books

Death To An Odd Sort Noble

chapter 1

I

There was only the faintest of winds. It wasn't on account of the figure the hue of darkness who entered through the main gate that the blades of green grass filling either side of the marble road swayed. The boots the figure wore didn't make a sound. There was nothing at all to betray his presence. Even the cowardly insects that were like a blanket under the moonlight wouldn't move. Perhaps he was made of the very same stuff as the darkness.

The figure went into the ruins. The front garden was so vast it seemed it would take the wind days to sweep across it, though naught but weeds grew there, poking their faces from tumbled stone walls and mounds of rubble to give the place an air of desolation. It was clear that the ruined minarets and ramparts in the distance had suffered explosions. Even the paved stone road the figure traveled showed definite signs of damage from fire. The light of the crescent moon poured down like a white waterfall. As if to say, *This is a world of decay, and there are none of the living here.*

The shadowy figure halted.

The half-collapsed marble gate could be considered the main feature of the garden, and beneath it there glowed a silent woman in a white dress. Black hair that hung all the way down to her waist swayed incessantly. There was no wind. It had died out a short time ago.

The woman called out the shadowy figure's name. "D," she said. Her tone was

low, like a sigh. A pale purple veil covered her mouth.

“Yes,” the figure said. He had a cold, hard voice that seemed as if it could freeze the moonlight or the wind. “Are you Sirene?”

“Indeed, I am.”

“I’d like to confirm the job—you wish me to do away with Duke Van Doren, administrator of the northern Frontier sectors?”

“You are correct, sir.”

“A hundred thousand dalas.”

“Here,” the woman said, taking something small and glittering off her right index finger. “Catch.”

It arced through the moonlight, as if drawn to D’s left hand.

“It’s moonstone,” said a hoarse voice that didn’t reach the woman’s ears. “Just a chunk of rock to the Nobility, but humans would pay a million dalas for it. If folks find out you’ve got it, everybody we meet’s gonna try and make like a thief!”

“I’ll give you your change,” D told the woman—Sirene.

She shook her head and replied, “You needn’t bother. I won’t be needing it anymore.”

“In that case, give it to your relatives.”

“Please do that for me. Give it to Myosha Lanaway in the village of Wihemin, Darigles County, the northern Frontier.”

“My job is doing away with Nobility.”

“I don’t have time to look for anyone else. I must be going soon.”

“Oh,” the hoarse voice responded.

Whether or not Sirene took that for D’s voice was unclear as she continued, “My real name is Cecilia Lanaway. A century ago I became the wife of Duke Van Doren. Myosha is the name of my former husband.”

D didn’t say anything. There was no way her former husband would still be

alive. And she must've known that, too. But the young man in black had no interest in other people's lives.

"Your request is accepted. Where is the duke?"

"In his primary castle, about forty miles northwest of here. He didn't even flee when the people under his dominion rebelled."

"I understand," D said, turning his back to her. The hem of his coat sailed out like the wing of a supernatural bird.

"Please, wait," the woman said to him, extending one hand. The voice suddenly sank.

D halted.

"I say this just so you'll know. Both the citizens of his domain and bandit groups are after the duke. And in a few days, an armed 'survey party' from the Capital should be coming. Please don't slay the duke until he has slain all of them."

"Sounds like Mister Popularity," the hoarse voice said mockingly. This time, it reached Sirene's ears. "Everybody's underestimating the Nobility. This Duke Van Doren guy seems like he's incredibly lazy or just a coward. But even at his weakest, he'd probably have enough power to turn those under him to dust with one finger."

"You're exactly right," Sirene said, a ring of surprise to her voice. She hadn't taken those disparaging remarks just now as coming from D.

"So, you hire *this guy* to do away with your husband because you don't want the greedy bastards to get to him first? Which means what? You want your husband destroyed at your bidding?"

"A very good question. I-I simply couldn't let him go on that way."

"Sometimes there are folks like that. As a human, you're odd enough for wanting to serve the Nobility with all your heart. Love 'em too much, and you push yourself to the point where it can't help but destroy you. Let's get one thing straight: a Noble can't love a human as a person. At best, they might love 'em about as much as people love cats or dogs, you—gyaaaaah?!"

His hand still clenched in a fist, D started to walk away.

“There is something I’d like to ask you about,” said Sirene. “Why didn’t you ride your horse all the way in here?”

There was no reply. The figure in black just kept dwindling in the light of the moon.

“Could it be that it was because the paving stones were simply too beautiful? These stones were chosen and their arrangement decided by my beloved.”

The figure had nearly vanished.

Sirene reached a hand around to her back for her dagger, tossed away the scabbard, and plunged the blade through her own heart without the slightest hesitation.

“I hear that dhampirs have Noble blood in them,” she said. “I hope my beloved might, at the very least, be destroyed at the hands of one who understands the Noble mind before he’s swallowed up by tragedy. Death and destruction are the end.”

Bluish-gray dust flowed from the bottom of her dress. The white garment lost its shape as the body within it became something else.

“D . . . I beg of you . . . Let my beloved . . . be buried . . . with my thoughts and memories,” said a girl who looked to be only sixteen or seventeen, barely squeezing out the words before she turned to dust.

“She’s gone,” the hoarse voice said wearily as the Hunter was up in the saddle, riding his cyborg horse away from the castle. “Suicide, eh? Been a while since I’ve seen one of those. A rare thing with the Nobility dying out, but leave it to a human to do that.”

“She was a servant of the Nobility.”

“Hey, now,” the hoarse voice started to say, but then it stopped. It had given up. No one had a harsher opinion of the Nobility and the humans they’d bitten than this young man.

“But the job itself is a problem,” the left hand continued. “From what I hear, Duke Julius Van Doren, administrator of the northern Frontier sectors, is a

valiant leader and soldier. Even you couldn't tackle this like you normally do. And the bandits prowling the area are the Pitch Black Gang. They're a band of ruthless outlaws that've tamed monsters the Nobility created, and rumor has it they can even use some of their weapons. Plus, there's that survey party from the Capital—'survey' has a nice ring to it, but they're all just a bunch of jerks slobbering over a chance to swipe some of the Nobility's inventions or technology and make themselves rich. And they ain't above murder."

And after saying that, the voice trembled a bit as it continued, "And now you can't drop it. A curse on her for setting it up that way. She might want Duke Van Doren to have a peaceful death, but it sure ain't gonna be easy."

Not even the hoarse voice's assertion could draw an answer from D.

Light like ice spread across the eastern sky, and the darkness around him was losing its hue moment by moment.

The northern Frontier was called a land of black forests and lakes. Paint a page completely black, add a few splashes of blue, and you'd have a map of the northern Frontier. Winds constantly roamed the plains, nimbus clouds relentlessly hung overhead to provide rain, but occasional sunlight was allowed to peek from between the clouds. When it did, the light gave the mountains, plains, and villages a golden glow, and children and animals alike raced outside to enjoy the sunlight to its fullest.

It was thirty minutes later that D arrived at the base of the hill overlooking Castle Van Doren. He'd covered forty miles at a gallop. For him, that was slow.

There was no rain, but the color of the heavens was far from blue, and there were occasional rumbles of thunder in the distance, investing the heavens with a dull light.

"Strange domain, ain't it?" remarked the hoarse voice from the vicinity of the Hunter's left hand, which gripped the reins. "Here's a land where the Nobility still has complete control over the folks in their domain. Through fear, namely."

"Can we get in?" D inquired. It was rare that he asked a question.

"Easy as pie. He ain't even got a force field up. Either he's a Nobleman who

likes to leave himself wide open, he's incredibly self-confident—or he ain't even trying."

The reins shook, and then the cyborg horse started down the road to the castle. To either side of the road stood a row of great cedars, with branches large and small intertwining to form a natural canopy about a hundred and fifty feet above the road. Even when the sun was at its highest, the road would likely remain in gloomy darkness.

Climbing a stone-paved road with a gentle incline that couldn't have even been ten degrees, the Hunter came to a square before the main gates. The stones that made up the road spread like wings there, paving the whole ground.

"What, no welcoming committee?" the hoarse voice gibed.

From dawn to dusk, the abodes of Nobles had impenetrable defenses for two miles all around. Lasers and land mines and monsters for starters, dimensional cannons or orbital plasma cannons, systems for using asteroids from our own solar system as meteorite bombs, temporal vortex cannons and the like would be waiting for any invaders.

There was none of that here.

"On top of that, there ain't any signs at all of fighting here in the square. I'd heard there hadn't been any rebellions, and it looks like it's true. Wonder if that outpost castle we were just at was destroyed after it was abandoned. I don't care how mild-mannered a Noble is, humans would've left a mark or two on their castles back in the days of the Great Rebellion. Was this Nobleman really that good of an administrator for 'em?"

As the voice spoke, D rode on.

Before the main gates was a moat about sixty feet wide. Its black waters reflected the cyborg horse and D where they halted at the brink.

"So, how are we getting across?" the hoarse voice asked, but then it immediately groaned, "What the hell?"

The distant gate was slowly falling. It doubled as a drawbridge.

"Strike that remark about the welcoming committee. This is a real warm

welcome.”

Ignoring the hoarse voice, D rode onto the bridge. Perhaps he gave no thought to this being a trap, for he rode on in silence, crossing the bridge without saying a single word.

Within the gate was an inner courtyard. Ramparts that looked to be about a hundred and fifty feet high surrounded it, and from atop those walls countless old-fashioned cannons were pointed in the Hunter’s direction. By the look of them, they used gunpowder and fired cannonballs. There were figures beside the cannons. Beneath that ash-gray sky, they gazed at D without moving a muscle.

“They’re androids. I don’t sense any human presence or vitality around the castle.”

If one were to look more closely, they might spy figures in the windows of the towers and minarets. They took the shape of young Noblewomen with golden hair, redheaded ladies in waiting, and black-haired servants. Those in uniform were probably guards.

When D reached the very center of the courtyard, a voice from the top of the castle walls to his right called down to him, “Halt!” It was youthful. The voice of a man in his thirties. However, it was that of an android.

II

Halting his steed, D turned toward the speaker.

“Someone will be out to meet you presently. Wait there,” the android said, rather unexpectedly. He wore a deep blue cape over his military garb. He was an officer.

“I’ll be damned. Not only are they gonna sit back and let you waltz in, but now they’re sending somebody to greet you? Watch yourself. No telling what they’re up to!”

D turned forward again. For the doors to the castle had opened.

A golden light had come into the dim world.

The trio of women had blonde hair that nearly touched the ground, and it

swayed faintly in the breeze. Leaving the ones in the cerulean and indigo dresses behind, the woman in the azure dress came forward. She halted about a yard shy of the cyborg horse. She was so lovely the left hand let out an appreciative groan. And the instant she saw D, the woman brought her hands up to her cheeks. Pink quickly suffused her face. She wasn't a human being. This was the reaction of a mechanical person—an android.

The left hand let out another gasp. This time it was for a different reason.

"I am known as Shyna. The master is waiting."

If ever there were a voice like golden chimes, it was hers.

"Van Doren can remain awake in the morning?" asked D.

"For a short time. This way."

Shyna turned, introducing the waiting Mysch in the cerulean dress and Najina in indigo. The cheeks of both had long since flushed. The two of them flanked the cyborg horse. They were not simply a reception committee. They also doubled as guards. And they had another role—as assassins.

D got off his steed just in front of the door.

The castle was filled with the light of morning. There was no frosted glass, no curtains or shades drawn.

Letting in an abundance of natural light—though that hardly suited a vampire's physiology, it was wholly in keeping with the "nostalgic taste" imprinted even more deeply into the DNA of the Nobility. The Nobles had taken no greater pains than to ensure so much sunlight got into their stone castles that it seemed like it would melt the place. It was this very abundance of light that always surprised scholars investigating the Nobles' ruins.

On seeing the round stones paving the floor, the hoarse voice said, "Must be an old-timer." It wouldn't reach the ears of the three women. Fooling androids was quite an accomplishment. Naturally, there was a reason for its snide remark.

Even Nobles had their own personalities, and each of them had their own favorite "era." Two styles of architecture from human history were favored by

the Nobility. There were those who preferred the baroque architecture of the modern age, while others insisted on rococo style or nothing at all. Sixty percent of the Nobility fell into one of those two camps, twenty percent had varied tastes, and the remaining twenty percent liked the most ancient styles—to wit, the fortresses of medieval Europe, which were focused entirely on practical concerns and gave no thought at all to aesthetic matters.

While the main design naturally reflected the Nobility's super science, the castle through which D strode had no walls or cathedral ceiling embellished with lavish murals, and illumination was provided by dishes of oil resting in recesses carved in the stone. There wasn't even glass in the windows, but iron frames and heavy, woven curtains kept the wind at bay. Instead of *simple, stark* might've been a better word to describe the place.

"Hurry," Shyna said, raising her right hand when she came to the first corner. A crimson ring glittered on her third finger.

Though the stone pavement beneath his feet began to move, D showed no surprise.

The transportation system flowed along much like the waters of a canal would. The flow rose vertically up a wall. The force of gravity shifted accordingly, and D continued right up the wall. They were traveling at quite a good speed—over a hundred and twenty miles per hour.

In less than a minute's time, they came to a wooden door, the surface of which had been scorched black. Taking the brass communication tube from beside the door in hand, Shyna announced, "I have a guest with me."

"Enter," the voice of a man of advanced years replied without a moment's hesitation, sounding somewhat melancholy.

Shyna took hold of the brass doorknob.

At that point, D was looking down at the blurry streaks of black that stretched from the sides of the door. There were two of them. Both of them seemed to reach all the way back down the corridor.

The door opened.

It was a large room. Some might even call it vast. Even D, with eyes that could

see as well in pitch blackness as in broad daylight, took a little while to make out the figure who stood before an enormous stone desk that was set in the center of the room.

He was a towering figure, wearing a long, long cape of the fur of the sacred fire beast, and in his right hand he held a black cane with a golden handle. His crown was of the very simple spiked style, fashioned from a silvery, nearly indestructible metal and, oddly enough, devoid of so much as a single jewel. Though it was a tad comical in appearance, it didn't make him look like a jester at all.

"D, is it?" he said, his voice low but seeming to reverberate through the vast chamber. "So good of you to come. I am Duke Julius Van Doren. Sirene told me about you. She left a note relating exactly what she was thinking before she headed out to meet you."

"And you didn't stop her?"

"This is the act of a woman who stood by me for a century without once complaining. No one had a right to criticize her. Myself included."

"Then you must know what brings me here, right?"

"Of course. For your information, you need not heed Sirene's wishes. Worry not about the human invaders. I shall be happy to settle with you here and now."

"Sirene's stipulations were to the contrary."

"After I've eliminated those who are out to take my lands, my fortune, and my inventions, then?" Apparently she'd written about that, as well. "Although I don't fail to see what she was thinking, it still strikes me as a foolish human notion."

"If my aim were to slay you, I would cross swords with you here and now and be done with it," said D.

Why had Sirene hired him to do it only after those who threatened the duke had been dealt with? And why did they have to die by the duke's hand?

"I, too, see no reason why I should be quick to throw away a life I rather

enjoy,” the duke replied. “I shall do battle with you after I have rid myself of those greedy churls.”

“I heard about a survey party from the Capital, a bandit gang, and a force of rebellious villagers. When will they be here?”

“The survey party should arrive on the morrow, the bandits two or three days hence. The village ingrates should take just about as long, I warrant.”

“Well informed, ain’t you?” said the hoarse voice.

Not seeming particularly surprised, the duke replied, “This is my domain. The rustling winds, the wheeling birds, the creeping insects, even the lifeless stones themselves tell me things.”

Was the duke trying to say he was privy to D’s conversation with Sirene? Still, to happily allow an assassin like D into his abode, even knowing that the Hunter wouldn’t slay him immediately, took an astonishing amount of nerve.

“Be that as it may, today is peaceful enough,” the duke continued. That, too, was remarkable. “And you have been good enough to grace us with a visit. There are two or three sights here that might interest you. Shyna, show him the way.”

When D had entered the room, the door had shut behind him, leaving the lady in waiting outside. Now it was open again.

D turned right around. Since he intended to honor his contract with Sirene, Duke Van Doren wasn’t his prey at this very moment.

Just before he passed through the doorway, D turned and looked back. The duke had one hand resting on the back of a huge chair as he stared straight ahead. D didn’t seem the type to have much interest in the art treasures of the world, but even this Tiger King, mightier than any beast, looked terribly weary to him.

“This is an image of the Sacred Ancestor,” Shyna said, looking up at the colossal statue that towered before her.

She was about thirty feet from the statue’s pedestal, which was about ten

feet high, although to the viewer it would've looked practically flat. The statue that stood on the pedestal was so enormous it overwhelmed its surroundings. The right half of the figure was covered by a cape, and it vanished at a height of about a hundred feet, with his left arm looped around behind his back at waist level. It was as if the vast chamber were losing its darkness to the rays of dawn stabbing in through scattered windows and skylights.

"In the distant past, statues such as this one towered in the manse of every Noble, bathed in the light of the moon. Though the doleful winds of ruin visited our world ere long, the statues could not be melted down, so they were carried off and cast into the depths of the sea or the bowels of the earth, but still the glory of the Sacred Ancestor didn't fade in the least. And it probably won't for all eternity."

And then a voice said, "But then *he* knew winter."

Though Shyna turned and looked, she could see no one who was likely to have said such a thing. No one in the world should've known the Sacred Ancestor well enough to speak that way. The android thought she must be imagining things.

"Must've heard that wrong," said a completely different voice, confusing her electronic brain even further.

"Did you look upon him?" the woman asked.

There was no reply. The young man in black was as still as the darkness that remained at dawn.

Gazing at him in rapture, the android then looked up at the statue as if she would flee in terror, and that was when a terrific weight crashed down on her heart. It was troublesome having the same thoughts and emotions as human beings.

"No . . . You . . . It can't be," she said, her lovely pale countenance shifting between their two faces, studying them closely. It was only several seconds later that she remembered that the statue had no face.

The same was true for all images of the Sacred Ancestor. No sculptor could possibly render it. But not because the face of the Sacred Ancestor was

unknown. Because it was known *too well*.

A second later, Shyna didn't know why it was she'd been so afraid. It occurred to her that perhaps it hadn't been fear but rather just extreme surprise, but she only had that thought for a moment. The statue of the Sacred Ancestor and the Hunter before her must've had some kind of connection. A faceless statue and a gorgeous young man. What was it that she'd seen—or rather, felt?

He was too beautiful. So much so that he couldn't be of this world.

Giving a shake of her head, the female android started for the door that led out to the corridor.

From behind her, the hoarse voice said, "That's one big statue there. But it ain't just big. *He* wanted it to be thought of as him, so even though he was destroyed, he'll never be gone completely."

There was no reply to the hoarse voice, and the figure in black began closing the gap on Shyna without his feet making a sound on the marble floor.

On entering the next location, the hoarse voice let out another gasp.

It was a stone chamber without a single window, and gigantic cylinders stood in a row there. Masses of metal that stood as high as ten-story buildings, they seemed to stretch on forever in a sight that could only be described as magnificent.

"So, the ceiling has a stone lid—do they turn moonlight into energy or something?" the hoarse voice asked, its words still ringing with the same excitement from its earlier gasp. "That might be the best sort of energy for the Nobility, but it's just the light of the sun reflected off the lunar surface. In other words, sunlight. The Nobility lived by the light of the moon, though. You might even say they lived by a concept called 'moonlight.' Nobody ever even tried to turn it into a physical form of energy. On account of that would've shaken the very existence of the Nobility. That, plus the fact that even if you turned the light of the moon into energy, it still ain't nothing compared to solar power. Hmm. Did that rascal Van Doren manage to make an unprecedented 'concept amplifier'? Looks like he had a hell of a scientist working for him. Hey, android

lady, you happen to know that scientist's name?"

"I am unsure whose voice it is I hear," Shyna replied. "It was Professor Damien Krutz. He was still quite young."

Another voice—one like steel—said, "Is that the reason Duke Van Doren is called the Tiger? Physical and conceptual energy would've been sure to garner high praise from the Nobility. Enough that he could've taken on ten thousand Nobles alone, or moved with some degree of freedom in the light of the sun."

The female android kept her silence, as if to indicate just what a startling occurrence that was. The speaker knew these things.

When Duke Van Doren fought against twenty-three thousand Nobles of the anti-Sacred Ancestor faction in the northern Frontier's Darnell Straits and on the Ragakiseha Plain, he had only two hundred men with him for his shocking victory in what became known as the Battle of D.R. Ordinarily, even the most valiant of commanders could hold out against no more than a-hundred-to-one odds against his fellow Nobility. The only other exception to this was the Greater Nobleman Lord Greylancer's victory alone against three thousand foes long ago, but that was now half the stuff of legend, and the details of his battle were lost to time, while the details of the exploits of the Tiger King in the Battle of D.R. were still quite clear.

"What became of that scientist?" said a voice that was hoarse again, causing Shyna to furrow her brow.

"Word is that he was banished."

"What?! The developer of moonlight energy? Are Nobles in the habit of showing their gratitude with spite?"

"Apparently the order came from the duke's heir—his grace Leavis."

"Oh, and Daddy just sat back and let his boy call the shots? I find that hard to believe."

Shyna turned around. As she gazed at D in rapture, there was a certain determination in her eyes.

"Until now, we believed his grace the duke alone was fit to control this power.

However—now, there is one other . . .”

“And what became of Sonny Boy and the rest?”

“Leavis, the firstborn, died young; Kazel, the second son, was taken away; and the third son, Sebastian, left of his own accord.”

“Taken away?”

“Yes. Kindly ask his grace the duke for more details.” And after the woman had given that acceptable response, her lovely visage flushed with pink.

With three sons, Van Doren was guaranteed an heir. Yet they were all gone, leaving the duke alone.

“There is something that has been on my mind since I first saw your face, sir. Are you—”

The woman had said that much when there were suddenly indications of someone coming up behind D. From the crunch of hobnailed boots, it was a soldier.

“General Kiniski,” Shyna said, putting one knee on the floor and spreading her hands as she bowed her head.

III

“You’re D, are you?” said a man of about fifty with a face and body built for battle. Beneath a light yellowish-green cape he wore a dark yellowish-green uniform. The decorations he wore on the left breast of his uniform were all gold and platinum—proof that he was a military man of the first order. His left arm was missing from the shoulder down, and a mechanical device was slung over his right shoulder like a handbag.

This wasn’t some sort of hologram, like the one where any one piece contained an image of the whole. He was the genuine article.

The girl didn’t conceal her anxiety, but he said to her, “The duke has told me about him. And that I am not to offend him. Much to my chagrin.”

Walking over to D, he raised his beefy right hand by the side of his boulder of a face and offered a salute.

D didn't move.

"I am General Jelmin Kiniski. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

No matter what the military man might've been feeling, neither his face nor his actions betrayed any hint of aggression toward this invader. That was quite an accomplishment.

"I'm D."

"I've heard about you. They say you're a Hunter who has hit us where it hurts more than any of your kind before. I am most pleased to meet you."

"Be honest," said D.

The general's tone changed as he said, "I, Jelmin Kiniski, have seen no greater ignominy in life than having to meet a filthy ghoul like you face-to-face. I shall defend the duke, mark my words. Do not delude yourself that you'll be leaving here alive!"

"That's better," the hoarse voice said, making the stern general look around sharply. "Humans and Nobles alike have gotta say what's on their minds. Saves everybody a lot of needless stress. And that's the secret to a long life."

"Ventriloquism, I thought—but that's not it, is it?" General Kiniski fairly groaned. "Not that it matters. No point in asking our level of perfection of lower creatures."

"So, you're an android?" D inquired.

Shyna covered her mouth, and the general got a glint in his eye.

"You were made too well. Your eyes have the same murderous intent as any man. Is that device a meteorological weapon?"

"Astonishing—I can see why you've lived this long," said the general, not hiding his surprise. "For a filthy Hunter, you seem to have considerable abilities. I should like to freeze your very atoms, then burn you down to nothing, but that would only earn the wrath of the duke. However, keep in mind you will die by my hand one of these days."

"Now would be fine."

The general fell silent. The words he had to swallow had swollen with a certain emotion.

A number of figures spilled through the doorway. In no time at all, there were a dozen soldiers running over. But it was another voice that stopped the general.

“Will you not hold?”

The general turned around—and looked in the direction the words had come.

There stood the duke.

“Why—your grace!”

“Go,” the duke commanded the soldiers in a low, weary tone, and then he stared at the general.

“If I might say something,” the general began, stretching his neck and looking up into empty space. The soldier was not allowed to look his superior—his commander—in the eye.

“I know. It was D who provoked your hostility. But you shouldn’t have given in to it.”

“Yes, your grace.”

“This time, I shall overlook it—go back.”

“Understood.”

And giving a splendid bow, the android general walked away.

“Please forgive his rudeness,” the duke said as he watched the gigantic soldier leave. “But for all that, he’s a loyal retainer. I shall never have another like him. So I can’t very well have you staining your blade with him just yet.”

“We weren’t done seeing the sights,” said D.

“I had forgotten that I’m to go inspect the farmland this afternoon. Would you accompany me?”

“I’ll wait here.”

“Not interested? Well, the rebellion has laid down roots among the residents

of my domain. Do you not wish to see how I conduct myself against human combatants? It should prove most interesting.”

“Okay, then.”

What was it that changed D’s mind and made him give that response?

“Come to the airfield, then. Shyna will show you the way.”

The form of the duke grew hazy, then vanished. He’d been a hologram.

Perhaps D had understood as much, because he wasn’t at all surprised as he asked, “Does the duke see everything that happens here?”

“Everything in his entire domain,” Shyna replied. “Such is the duty of the liege.”

“Sounds like a big pain in the ass.”

Startled, Shyna turned her eyes in the direction of the voice—the left hand that hung by D’s side—but naturally she didn’t see anything.

On seeing the aircraft at the broad and dusty airfield, the hoarse voice said with disbelief, “What the hell is this? Is that your liege’s vehicle?”

Even in this day and age, when a Noble toured his domain, it was usually a regal affair—they would travel with android soldiers and simulacra troops, squads of beastmen, and colossal armaments for show, as well as a marching band and huge portraits of the Noble. Rural villages, towns, and cities would be notified of the visit beforehand and were required to prepare a proper greeting for their liege and his loyal Noble retainers. But at present many Nobles avoided the fanfare of those grand tours, preferring to call on parts of their domain by aircraft. This proved much less troublesome, and allowed for a more rapid response in case of attack by rebel forces. Even without a large body of troops to protect them, Nobles were capable of defending themselves without much effort at all.

Nevertheless, the aircraft had to make a certain impression. There was no way a Noble would use a jet engine—driven derelict like the humans did for flying. There were ion engine types, aircraft driven by magnetic force, and gravity-propelled craft, while aircraft using the more advanced galaxy drive

differed little from the ships used for interplanetary travel. If a massive ship over a thousand yards long set down, that would be more than enough to cow the residents of a Noble's domain, but it was all a charade of sorts.

It was standard practice to travel around in magnetism-powered aircraft that could hold twenty or thirty people. However, the aircraft that was waiting at the airfield was a smaller one that didn't look like it could even carry ten. The party had two android soldiers as an escort, two other androids to serve as a doctor and nurse, and yet another whose role was unclear. To all appearances, he was a fit fellow. Adding in D, Shyna, and the duke, that made eight people in total. That hardly seemed enough people to go out on patrol. The engine was the kind that worked by gravity propulsion.

"Today we shall be visiting six sites," the duke announced as soon as they'd lifted off.

"Sounds like a lot," the hoarse voice said in amazement.

Even with ungodly travel speeds, making the rounds to every corner of a vast domain would take years. Normally, a tour would concentrate on just a few places to visit, and be on the move for ten days at most. Of course, the residents of neighboring communities would come pouring in, swelling the population to something more befitting a city. There were areas in the domain where Nobles had been left as chief administrators, but matters that they couldn't settle had to wait for the liege to come and adjudicate.

"Where exactly shall we visit?" Shyna inquired. She was accompanying them in her role as D's attendant and keeper.

"Murabak, Gorse, Toryatoo, Manook, Lilac, and Epic."

"Those are all northern villages. And they are all far from the administrative district. It would take twenty days to tour them by horse," Shyna whispered to D.

"This doubles as providing medical care to the remote areas, too?" the hoarse voice asked, sounding suspicious. "You do a lot of that?"

"Yes," Shyna replied, her tone hard. Because she didn't believe the voice belonged to D. "We spend half the year traveling around the remote

communities. Naturally, we hear their appeals at that time, but recently medical service has become the greater responsibility.”

“Thought there were supposed to be a lot more hospitals staffed by medical androids out there than there were in your administrative district.”

“The rebel army keeps destroying them.”

“They as tough as all that?”

“In the old days, they couldn’t do anything more than dig up graves by day and hammer stakes into their occupants. However, more recently they’ve taken the Nobility’s weapons and copied them as well as developing armaments of their own, making them someone not at all to be taken lightly.”

“Hmm. Heard talk like that in the south and west, and it’s the same here, too, eh? The rebel armies had competent leaders in both those places. How about here?”

“The best leader the rebellion’s had since its inception. His name is Gilshark, it seems.”

“Hmm.”

“Villages near the borders of our domain frequently come under attack by bandits. They used to take whatever they wanted, but since Gilshark came to power, I hear they haven’t come around much lately.”

“Must be a hell of an opponent. No doubt he runs a tight ship, too. And the duke doesn’t go out to mop ’em up?”

“He often did, until a decade ago. However, he never could catch their leader, and lately his heart really doesn’t seem to be in it.”

“But it ain’t as if they’ve suddenly started behaving themselves.”

“No, they seem on course to overrun the capital of the northern Frontier sectors.”

“And he’s just letting them do it? That doesn’t sound like a man they’d call the Tiger.”

The two were conversing in hushed tones. Because they were hardly the only

ones onboard.

“What about an heir?”

The voice had suddenly changed. A dark delight spread across Shyna’s face.

“If his three children are gone, ordinarily he’d bring someone else in and adopt him,” the Hunter continued. “But he hasn’t done so?”

“That is correct.”

On hearing her reply, D said something.

“Tigris Rex?” the hoarse voice inquired. “Oh, you mean the Tiger King? Well, this king seems awful tired to me!”

At that point, the voice of Duke Van Doren, who occupied the cockpit’s single seat, rang through the airship. “We’re beginning our descent,” he said. “We shall be landing in a minute.”

To be continued in

VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 28

THE TIGER IN WINTER

Coming Soon

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City Shinjuku*, in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. Many live-action and anime works in 1980s and 1990s Japan were based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan in 1952. Recruited as a character designer by the legendary anime studio Tatsunoko at age 15, he created the look of many notable anime, including *Gatchaman*, *Genesis Climber Mospeada* (which in the US became the third part of *Robotech*), and *The Angel's Egg*, an experimental film by future *Ghost in the Shell* director Mamoru Oshii. An independent commercial illustrator since the 1980s, Amano became world famous through his design of the first ten *Final Fantasy* games. Having entered the fine arts world in the preceding decade, in 1997 Amano had his first exhibition in New York, bringing him into contact with American comics through collaborations with Neil Gaiman (*Sandman: The Dream Hunters*) and Greg Rucka (*Elektra* and *Wolverine: The Redeemer*). Dark Horse has published over 40 books illustrated by Amano, including his first original novel *Deva Zan*, and the forthcoming *Yoshitaka Amano: Beyond the Fantasy—The Illustrated Biography* by Florent Gorges.